

Why Does The Homelessness Crisis Continue in Multnomah County?

There are many reasons, valid criticisms, of the local government's approach to address the crisis of homelessness in Multnomah County.

Without doubt the intention to solve this crisis has existed for many years and taxpayers are in agreement to spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year to solve it—more than 1.57 billion dollars since 2023.

Yet, the number of homeless people continues to rise.

This criticism focuses on the narrow mindedness of the status quo approach and calls for a broadening perspective of the problem and solution.

To begin with, the main focus of the City of Portland has been to increase shelter beds; but shelter beds can't solve the problem of people not having housing. Shelter beds and services serve the needs of the domestic refugee population, but they remain refugees without a place of their own.

The goal of shelter services is to get people moved into housing from the shelter; but this is difficult at best when those in the shelters don't have a job to pay rent and so would depend on housing grants.

Moreover, without a job, there is no way for the recently housed by rental assistance to keep their housing once the rental assistance ends. The hope is, the recently housed will find employment before their assistance runs out.

Why invest so much in hope? Why not have a program that affords a job and housing?

These questions beg the second criticism which is the status quo approach is to get the chronically unhoused into housing, the people with significant mental illness and/or addiction issues; but this isn't the best top priority for housing.

In fact, the longer a person is homeless or even living in a shelter, the more likely they are to suffer from significant mental illness and/or addiction.

You don't need to be a psychologist to perceive the obvious. Being homeless or living in a shelter is stressful. It's a stress position not unlike torture and people so perplexed are necessarily more likely to become mentally ill or turn to substance abuse out of hopelessness and especially when they witness people who are worse off than themselves get housing first because they are more mentally ill or addicted.

There is no doubt this is the case in Multnomah County as it takes a rather long time to get services that would lead to a housing grant and very little or no help getting a job.

It is often said by those who work with the homeless that people need housing first and then recovery and a job will follow; but this is a straw man fallacy because there absolutely can be a program that affords housing and employment at the same time.

In fact, this dual model to address our most vulnerable community used to be the status quo.

Multnomah County had one of many “poor farms” that used to exist throughout the country, affording housing through employment for destitute people.

Today, that poor farm building is now the McMenamin's Edgefield—a hospitality venue.

In 1854 the territorial legislature of Oregon gave counties the mandate to care for the poor. In 1868 Multnomah County built its first poor farm. The poor were afforded housing and food by employment doing farm work.

The poor weren't paid wages, but paid with housing and food. Other social services were added over time; but this all ended in 1982 after it had evolved into a nursing home for the elderly.

The original idea of the poor farm, however, is still sound logic. Those who are destitute yet able bodied can be afforded employment by government so they can meet their need for housing.

During the Great Depression, there were many government employment programs to help the destitute.

Today, Multnomah County is suffering through a “Little Depression” as the cost of living continues to rise while wages are generally stagnant, with job growth being marginal.

Farm work is no longer an option for today's homeless. The economy has changed a lot and yet there is still the economic constant of supply and demand.

Multnomah County has a short supply and high demand for clean energy. It also has a large population of people close to homelessness and those experiencing homelessness.

The local government has focused on the psychoanalysis of the destitute rather than address the fundamental problem of unemployment-homelessness.

Why not have shelter staff get the most able bodied clients into an employment-housing program that supplies renewable energy for the county? The demand for that is certainly there.

This shouldn't be the only program staff has for options, but getting the most able bodied into such a program would arrest the cycle of stress, hopelessness, mental illness and addiction.

It would get some of the homeless population out of that cycle before they would qualify as the ultra vulnerable and so rental assistance while awaiting a possible Social Security disability award.

The less able bodied would see another option appear, where the more able they were the more likely they would qualify for this program and so then incentive to constructively deal with underlying mental illness and sobriety.

There is no rational objection to this model.

Everyone knows it takes money to afford housing and the expectation is people have to earn that.

Everyone knows homelessness is incredibly stressful and very dangerous, so the homeless are necessarily more likely to become mentally ill and/or substance abusers the longer they are homeless.

Anyone can see the historical examples, and how they worked very well, where the government created jobs programs to help the poor and most destitute.

Most people are in agreement that fossil fuels bring serious health risks in addition to the evidence they contribute to climate change. So, the demand for renewable energy can't be denied except for how it might be too expensive.

From these facts, it follows that the homelessness crisis can be seen as an opportunity to organize labor among the unemployed and destitute so the economic demands for the greater community are met while simultaneously getting the homeless into housing for the express purpose of meeting demand.

To be sure, only a small percentage of those in the shelters would qualify as the most able and so qualify for this new program and approach; but in doing that it prevents the erosion of wellbeing that eventually turns those able bodied adults into disabled people.

So, in a way, an employment-housing program does address the most vulnerable as it would prevent people from becoming that vulnerable.

This approach is already in practice and continuing to prove to be more successful than the status quo of rental assistance for those in shelters who would then gain income from disability insurance.

Central City Concern, Cultivate Initiatives, Join PDX, and Volunteers of America all have success in employing formerly homeless people in Multnomah County.

A new program to do the same thing, employing people who have their homelessness experience as a barrier to finding employment, should be the top priority for Multnomah County.

We know most homeless people and many in the shelters are not employed. We know the longer a person is without employment or recent employment references the more difficult it is to find employment.

We know the longer a person is homeless and unemployed the more stress they have, putting them at greater risk for mental illness and substance abuse.

We know Oregon taxpayers have spent close to 1.6 billion dollars to address homelessness and none of that money has been invested in an employment-housing program despite over a century of historical success including recent successes for that model.

This is why the homelessness crisis continues. It is because alternative and experimental approaches to treat underlying issues of mental illness and addiction have been prioritized even though that approach necessarily exacerbates the development of mental illness and addiction among the homeless.

Those who are severely mentally ill and addicted to drugs and alcohol need help; but they are not more deserving as the most able bodied in the homeless population. Moreover, recent years have shown that prioritizing the least able among the homeless hasn't improved the situation and we can understand why.

The false premise is, the most able among the homeless will pull themselves up by their bootstraps while the least able need public assistance.

We need to do both and recognize getting people a work history as soon as they get housing has the most return for the taxpayer.

Beyond the homeless population, there are also the millions of taxpayers who not only want to see the homelessness crisis come to an end but also want to see a greater stimulus to the local economy and so it is overdue to start seeing the homeless population as a human resource—people who can contribute and not merely the mentally ill and addicted.

Shelters do not allow alcohol or drug use. An employment-housing program could have the same protocol and should. There ought to also be a higher standard than the shelters where random UA testing is done so people can keep their job and housing.

That too is a proven successful model in recovery housing projects; but does not exist for people who get into housing by public assistance voucher.

In conclusion, the reason why the homelessness crisis continues is because too many citizens and elected officials see the homeless as psychoanalytic caricatures and so ignore the significant number of able bodied potential workers among them.

This biased perspective, often informed by psychologists who only see things in psychoanalytic terms and generally do not perceive the same cause-effect mechanics the general population perceives, is a biased perspective from a mental health/addiction recovery industry.

It is not the only perspective. That perspective has failed to curb the homelessness crisis. It has also exacerbated the very problems of mental health and addiction among the homeless when the better solution is clearly understood by the common citizen.

These people need jobs and housing. There is dignity in work and with dignity comes mental health. With mental health, employment and housing are sustainable. People who are self reliant contribute to society.

It is long overdue to return to the tried and true model of project based employment-housing.