

Ask us what we need

A report of findings

Town Hall with people experiencing homelessness who addressed Mayor Ted Wheeler and Commissioner Dan Ryan on Council Resolution [901](#), reintroduced as Resolution [929](#). Wednesday, October 26, 2022 | November 1, 2022 | 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. | Blanchet House



Hosting organizations: AfroVillage PDX, Blanchet House, Gather: Make: Shelter, Ground Score Association, Hygiene4All, JOIN, Impact NW, Northwest Pilot Project, Operation Nightwatch, Oregon Kids Read, Our Just Future, Portland State University Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative, p:ear, Rose Haven, Sisters of the Road, Street Books, Street Roots, Urban League PDX and Welcome Home Coalition.

Executive Summary

Testimony was transcribed and organized into themes. The largest theme was fear – and even terror – about mass camps, and also, criminalization through a camping ban, which was also described as counterproductive. Speakers also asked that people experiencing homelessness not only be listened to, but considered as architects of solutions such as community responsive and inclusive villages that can work. People spoke of feeling dehumanized and infantilized through policies. Some people described why shelters don't work for people in the LGBTQI+ and BIPOC communities, in couples and families and in mental health crises. Many spoke of evictions and housing unaffordability as driving causes of homelessness. In terms of what can be done? Rent assistance, eviction prevention and other housing support services.

Recommendations

- Remove the camping ban and its relationship to mass camps. People described terror around entering these camps.
- Listen to people about solutions that work for them, including learning about community responsive village models that can be successful by incorporating community concerns into governance and policy making, and develop this policy from there.
- Invest the time getting this input. Agenda item 929 – formerly Agenda item 901 – has been rushed without engagement with people who have experienced homelessness. This town hall was pulled together through hundreds of hours of labor by volunteers and staff of community organizations to make up for the lack of engagement, but it was limited in scope to Old Town. The city needs to announce an extended engagement plan with people impacted by this policy. Examples can be found in the Portland Street Response pilot development, which involved town halls in several geographic areas accessible to people experiencing homelessness, and an extended survey of people camping around the city.
- Support people with outreach, eviction prevention, long-term rent assistance. The city should focus on real housing options for people.

Findings

We organized through content analysis, transcribing testimony and grouping it into themes. Here are the themes:

- Engage *directly* with constituents experiencing homelessness, including those who are successfully organizing
- Mass camps are not the answer and are, in fact, terrifying
- Criminalization isn't only unfair, it's counterproductive
- Homelessness stresses mental health

- Street outreach is important
- Policies infantilize and dehumanize people, who lose trust
- There are reasons some people avoid shelters
- Lack of affordable housing is a cause of homelessness
- Eviction is a cause of homelessness
- Barriers include lack of ID, health
- Support rent assistance and other programs that can get people into housing and help them retain it
- Support services are important

Engage *directly* with constituents experiencing homelessness, including those who are successfully organizing

“The answer is finding how to talk to the people ... Come see the homeless, be part of them. If you understood them, and had a conversation with them, you'd know that they were just like you. Some of them have big dreams, but they can't get out of the homeless thing. – Jennifer Bradford

“It would be great if you can maybe bring some people to the table that are actually living in homelessness and ask us what we want and what we need, and do something with that.” – James

“I have really good ideas. Mr. Ryan, I spoke with you at the Concordia neighborhood association meeting, you may recall Dr. Monari called my camp a gold standard in a way, you guys should be allowed to have small individual camps that are run by the members. Put them out there, all over the city, this small area that allows us to have our space, we can pick who our neighbors are and we can also be held responsible for our area and not be held responsible for the actions of our neighbors. Because that's not fair.” – Becky

“I think the best way to guarantee success is to form focus groups and listening sessions like this. And the committee that listens to the voices that are hard to reach and deserve to voice their concerns and help get input on how to create these new camps of shared space. At Right To Dream we are a community of 20 members in a tiny home village, and we open up to over 40 people every night. The village model is very successful in our city, a shared space for 20 to 40 people is safer and easier for people to find community in the lifestyle needed to thrive. I imagine if we had a conversation with the city's many neighborhoods and the neighborhood associations, we could find small spaces of land that could support tiny village communities and invite them to open a village. Neighborhoods could reach out to the people that call their streets their home and find a

space where they can get access to resources and safe sleep instead of moving people out of their comfort zones and into larger camps. Having more options throughout the city will help clear up the many individual campsites, the congestion, and the hygiene and trash removal needs. Having more options will also increase the likelihood that people trust trying out larger camps. And they present options for people that don't feel comfortable in larger camps or that leave. As these villages get to thrive, neighborhoods would have opportunities to reach out and meet their houseless neighbors, like we do in the Lloyd district. At Right To Dream we get weekly donations from neighbors and we pass them out to people that come by. So I suggest you talk to villages for insight in forming the camps. And we could share experiences about what works and help avoid repeated mistakes that we see all these new villages to have. I think we need to take steps like this and many more before the city criminalizes unsanctioned camping. And just be creative about helping you open up more space. Thank you very much.” –Vince Masiello

Mass camps are not the answer and are, in fact, terrifying

“But what I want you to know is if I was forced to live with hundreds of people that would mess with my anxiety, it would actually take me back to the days I spent in the Superdome when Hurricane Katrina hit. It was overcrowded, the smell of urine and feces filled the hallways, and there were people in there that were pedophiles, criminals, and needed mental help. If you have never been in a situation like that you will never understand. And for the city to consider placing all these people in one place is crazy, because there are different levels of homelessness.”
– Marqueesha Ollison

“I do find it strange to have 500 people in one spot, the dangers of being assaulted. I experienced homelessness after I moved out here and lost my job and lost my car. Couldn't get any help. We struggled to keep 30 people safe. It's gonna be a struggle to keep 500 people safe.” – Veronika Thomas

“ Throwing everyone in overpopulated camps is not a sustainable solution. Thank you.” – Nicole

“I want to share my experience living in a VOLUNTARY camp of 30 tiny homes. Even with only 30 villagers we experience tremendous challenges. I cannot imagine living in a tent camp with 125 people. Today I want to highlight just one grave problem that we face in our village - that of mental health crises. In the camp the lack of preparation for supporting people in grave mental crises causes so much trouble for us. Each month a handful

of people show up suffering from delusions which result in conflict and violence that places us and employees in physical jeopardy.

If it is so terribly challenging to manage conflicts sparked by people in mental crisis in the 30 person village I live in, how do you intend to manage the hundreds of mental health crises people will face in camps of hundreds of people? What will happen when camp administrators inevitably have to expel dozens of people in crisis back to the streets? Are you going to put all the people who are acutely mentally ill in jail? And how will your strategies affect the general public as dozens of people filter back onto the streets in far more acute mental crises, thanks to first being forced into mass tent-cities and then ejected from the same?"

– Guillermo Rawsy (translated by Sandra Comstock from Spanish)

“Putting them into a tent way out the way from the services is not the answer. What will help is those people that don't understand it, come go out with the [Street Roots] ambassadors, you'll get to know who people are.” – Jennifer Bradford

“I want to say thank you for coming and listening to this. Hopefully you don't have to say, to me, this isn't long before. This is a terrible idea. I mean, three camps or 500 people in internment camp is a group where you put people that have not committed a crime, but they are a member of a group that was found distasteful or illogical. Sounds like what you're doing here? How are you going to have security, you've got multiple people that are free to just walk down the street now. When they're surrounded by 499 strangers, they're not gonna feel any safer. We're saying people were each a flavor. Have you ever tried to make a soup with 500 different spices? It's not going to be good.” – James

“We have to make sure we have our food we have the way to cook it and as we start fires you guys want that first because of all the camps burning down. And then we have our animals, a lot of places won't let us take our pets in there. So what you can do is all put all these pets in great big camp encampments that they're there to protect their owners and their owners are not going to be feeling protected if you make them take three animals away. They're not mean, our animals, they love us. But their job is to protect us.” – Angela

“My concern with the mass camps, especially, is that trans and non binary people are going to be really, really unsafe, even worse than they are in shelters with like 30 or 60 people that are supervised constantly. Like we really need somewhere where we can stay in a community where we are safe from all of that, because we just want to exist and thrive like

everybody else. Like I know one of the C3Po camps has been LGBTQ specific, and that folks can find great community and support in more niche, smaller communities like that. And I think we need more of that, we definitely need more places for trans and non binary folks to be safe, not being misgendered, being able to stay somewhere as the gender we are, and be able to have the resources that we need. **Criminalizing us because we don't want to live in a really hostile or downright dangerous environment is not the answer.**” – Phoenix Oaks

“I am not a celebrity in disguise. I am just a guy whose face’s geography was rearranged in a village. like the one we are talking about today. I stand here today with two fractures in my skull as we speak that may or may not require surgery to get my hobo glamour back. I don’t know if the surface cause of this assault was hatred, xenophobia, racism, or psychosis but at the base of it there was a mismanagement of otherwise well intended staff by the organization whose (let’s just say) highest priorities are not well being of the people living in the village. A village whose population is 30. I was assaulted by another villager whose mental condition, that I cannot describe or qualified to diagnose, nor was any staff member, who could dealt or was equipped with.

Like I said this was a 30 people village. And demographically speaking not very versatile cuz it caters to only LGBTQ community, I cannot imagine what may occur in a demographically more diverse village.

My distorted face is just a glimpse of what may occur at the village like the one in question, times 20 roughly. On one hand the “civilized society” is trying to recognize every human upon gender differences and here they expect that 500 different personalities shall be treated in single manner?

Here is a fun fact for you, take a trip up the Skyline Blvd some time, and count the graves in any block of the cemetery. We don’t even put more than 500 dead people in one block.

PS: just for the sake of setting benchmarks, I shouldn’t have to go through more scrutiny and paperwork to get into housing than I had to with homeland security to get into the United States.

– Fahad

Criminalization isn’t only unfair, it’s counterproductive

“This will lead to people being criminalized. And with that, this will make it even harder for them to be able to obtain jobs and as well as finding housing. It’s already hard right now with the [eviction] moratorium ended.

We have participants who are not able to get assistance from our programs to get their rent paid because landlords are not willing to work with them. **So if they are criminalized and get arrested for camping on the street that's adding another layer to the barriers that they already have to face.**” – Marqueesha Ollison

“If you fine and take people living without documents on the streets, you are putting them in jeopardy for deportation. During the Trump era ICE used tickets and court appearances to round people up and deport them.” – Guillermo Raws

“Sweeping people is not the answer.” – Jennifer Bradford

“With the camping ban, you’re saying that the one space we’ve carved out to sleep is now illegal and we’ve become common criminals. Who would run the mass encampment? Who would cover security? The National Guard? Would it be privatized? Am I free to come and go as I please? **We’ve committed no crime except trying to sleep.**”

Nobody deserves to feel like they are less than anybody else and we all deserve somewhere to belong. Not everybody is designed to be your next door neighbor – but they’re designed to be somebody’s neighbor somewhere. Please help us find our place and don’t make policy that criminalizes us for being outside.” – Kerry Robison

“Your sweeps are making people where they're not trusting anybody.”
– Anonymous

Homelessness stresses mental health

“The losses we have taken from being homeless is more than just possessions and our furniture and our clothing and our purses, my purses, and those things that we valued ourselves. **It's our confidence. It's our support systems.**”

“We have no way to cook food, except for a microwave. So every single situation is different. My biggest concern is how we don't focus on housing for families, and programs for families. What we're neglecting right now is the impact the mental health and the impact it has on our children. We live in a state of survival. We live in a place of trauma. **And I will tell you this right now, if we aren't willing to look deeply into the impact of our children, it is something generationally that will be carried on with them, and their children and their children after that.**”

– Rosa Quinones

Street outreach is important

“I think we need to address mental health issues. It's very important that we do so and also with outreach because a lot of homeless camps, there are surprisingly quite a bit of resources. Unfortunately, they're not well known to people. And unless the information gets out to people, get the word out to people, we can't deal with it. And also I think that we need, that we focus so much on homeless, and we focus too much on the homeless and housing and not enough on the mental issues.

“Mental disabilities come in under a broad spectrum, from drug use to the person that loses the job, the person that loses a family member. And there's different things. And I think we have to focus on the issue geometrically from all angles in order for this to work successfully. Thank you.” - Wallace Simpson

“Mayor Wheeler, I would like the city to address the fact that some of the sidewalk residents have tried to seek help, but the support system is not there. From my perspective, funding has been mostly focused on containing and that's perpetuating the problem. I feel the city needs to meet the houseless where they're at. A lot of them want help but they have nobody that cares enough about them to guide them through the process.”
– Nicole

Policies infantilize and dehumanize people, who lose trust

“The problem is you're constantly infantilizing the homeless and you're telling us what to do, where to go. And these are people are marginalized with trauma. Of course, they're going to fight back. They're not going to like to be told what to do. But there are people that need help, that want help, they'll gladly take that help if you ask them what they need help with.”
– Becky

“**We're not animals, we're people.**” – Josephine

There are reasons some people avoid shelters

“We both have health concerns and Tim struggles with PTSD, which is why we have steered clear of communal shelters. There aren't accommodations for a couple like us with one disabled partner and there is no privacy.”
– Kerry Robison

“They didn't have the capacity to stay at the shelter because they had PTSD so bad that they would just react to anything. Or they would shout in their sleep in the night. ... **Anyway, the shelter isn't always a friendly place.** And I almost lost my mind by the end of six months in a shelter.”
– Cole White

Lack of affordable housing is a cause of homelessness

“But the lack of work due to the pandemic and affordable housing left me living on the streets” – Guillermo Rawsi

“**The housing situation is too expensive for some of us.** For me being unhoused wasn't like a choice, it's something that happened.”
– Veronika Thomas

Eviction is a cause of homelessness

“My family lived sheltered in a Motel Six for the last three years. We came from a very good income working class family, to things just falling apart. And we literally have lost over 90% of our income, which has kept us in the situation we're in. We were renters. And we had a horrible landlord, who put two evictions on us during the time ... And our family has suffered ever since. ” – Rosa Quinones

“I moved here from New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina hit. I am now a program manager at the Urban League of Portland trying to now help the community that I once was a part of. And so how I became homeless is when I first moved here, I was housed by an organization FEMA referred me to but that soon came to an end when the father of my kids was arrested from my home. I always paid my rent on time, and I minded my business. I got along with my neighbors. **But the property manager gave me a no-cause eviction because she said she didn't want any negative activity on her property. So I became homeless once again.** I lived in my car for 6 months with my two kids, who then were 6 years old and a 1 year old. There were times that we were harassed by the police because I would park my car near parks, and in residential areas where we could be near loved ones. We had nights where friends and family would open their doors, but we had many more nights on the streets. And it was hard to get to the point where we were stable.” – Marqueesha Ollison

Barriers include lack of ID, health

“A person can only make so much money without an ID, you know, and we need to be able to employ, find better ways to get our people back to work.”
– Kristopher Brown

“My personal experience is that we’ve tried to get housing. We’ve worked with different organizations over time, but part of the problem has been that we are a legally married couple with a small dog and most of these places are designed to help single people. We both have health concerns and Tim struggles with PTSD, which is why we have steered clear of communal shelters. There aren’t accommodations for a couple like us with one disabled partner and there is no privacy. My husband gets a disability check and I now work part-time for Street Books. We’d be able to pay subsidized rent but we have no path, no guidance, no help to get into an apartment. Where’s our niche? Where do we fit? I wake up 15 times a night because I’m afraid of his electric wheelchair getting stolen or our stuff getting gone through. We’re quiet, we stay to ourselves. We’re not criminals out breaking windows or damaging property, bothering people or being loud. **We’re just trying to survive.**” – Kerry Robison

Support rent assistance and other programs that can get people into housing and help them retain it

“I suggest instead of putting all these homeless people in large encampments, it would be better to **use the tools that we already have in place. Such as shelters, transitional housing, coordinated access, permanent supportive housing, rapid rehousing, and long term housing vouchers which should prioritize the most vulnerable populations.** Those who are houseless as well as Elderly, Disabled, those with children, and those with mental health disorders. I know that it works, because I’ve gone from a shelter, to transitional housing, all the way to where I was able to get a great job with a living wage where I can support my family, and become self-sufficient and stable.”
– Marqueesha Ollison

“The solution is a multi-level plan. **We need government – federal, state, and local to make changes to tenant protection laws, we need housing developers to consider making housing that’s affordable, property owners/property management to lessen some of the guidelines on rental applications, and a solution for rising rent costs.** We need community organizations and leaders to be able to assist with this heavy lift...It takes the whole community to make the plan work. We have to have compassion.” – Marqueesha Ollison

“One thing I enjoy about Portland is that it's the city that works. We'd like to focus on what works. **What works is rental assistance, safe shelters with resources, direct routes to housing, retention programs once you're in housing, and compassion.** That's why 90% of people who experience houselessness in Houston, Texas, are still housed today. That's what worked in Texas. That's what works on the streets of Portland sometimes. When people get those resources, and that's what worked in this life, because we received those resources from organizations like Gather:Make:Shelter, C3PO, certain staff at all good Northwest and Join and we'd love to be able to see that here. Universal equity for the people who live here in Portland as well. Thank you for the time” – Khem

“I want to let you know I have been homeless off and on for many years. I have gone from an apartment we had on the streets being in a motel from services that you've offered. **I've gotten those services, they bought me into a house or an apartment, I maintained it, and then all of a sudden they want me to pay full rent for everything after like just a few months. That's not enough time.** Being homeless is expensive. We have to buy, we have to get clothes, they're always getting wet.” – Angela

“We want housing, and we want a place to live, to call home.” – Anonymous

Support services are important

“In shower project that I work for, we sanitize the shower in between every participant, or every person that goes to use the shower. I doubt that you could get those kinds of results in a large camp like this. And if so, you'd have to pay a lot of money. And volunteers run the shower project, I suggest you maybe even just a little bit of funding in the shower programs like Hygiene4All and Sunnyside Shower Project, which are a volunteer run organizations and can get the job done for and expect expand more and be based on mutual aid and outreach.” – Cole White

“Yeah, we need to have better access **to job counseling, education, education, financial advice, testing that shows where our skills will be best served.** We need to be given the confidence to want to be working class citizens ... it's tough nowadays, especially with the recession and everything going on now.” – Kristopher Brown

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