

Maine Voices: We bear the cost of not supporting the people who need it

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By Cullen Ryan Special to the Press Herald

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Recent news coverage has focused on people hanging out on the streets, displaying unseemly behaviors, active in their addiction and negatively affecting local neighborhoods. I believe what we are seeing on the streets of downtown Portland and elsewhere is, in part, the result of cuts to the safety net of health care services and housing for people in need. It is exactly as we on the Statewide Homeless Council predicted when we spoke against those cuts.

There is a cost associated with insufficient access to support for people who need it. The state has been chipping away at access to Medicaid. Ten thousand Mainers were cut off from this health insurance program in 2013 simply because they were single adults. This has left many single adults without health care, ultimately leading to their long-term homelessness. People who are poor and suffering from terrible illnesses, including serious and persistent mental illness and substance use disorder, don't want to be miserable. But without support, they become stuck – unable to access treatment, health care and housing, and unable to access services that would allow them to be successful in that housing. This leaves them on full display on our streets, and crowding our shelters – easy prey for drug dealers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Untreated illness coupled with hopelessness never looks good.

We have countless studies – including several landmark studies in Maine – all concluding that it costs less to house people than to keep them in homelessness. These studies looked at the costs associated with emergency services – shelter, rescue, emergency room, medical, police, etc. – and compared that with the cost of housing and support services in the year after housing was provided. These results were significant because they were consistent across the country and the world, and for how much better the outcomes were for each person housed.

People do well when they are housed. People do not do well when they are homeless.

And so, in 2018, we watch the tragic story of people on the streets left out of the system of care they need. But what about the community? Are the rest of us better for keeping people homeless?

I think not.

None of us is better for having people struggling in public around us. It doesn't help our morale, our sense of community, our businesses, our tourism or our pride in our cities, our towns and our wonderful state. We are all lesser for leaving a subset of people out of health care, and out of housing. With [the opioid epidemic](#), and other epidemics to come, we can be sure of one thing: These problems will only intensify if left untreated.

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Somehow, we have all become stuck. The concept of austerity has gripped the globe like a fad – or a plague. Spending less, cutting programs, cutting government is the marker of our era. Do we like the results? Is the deterioration of some of our neighbors (or our society) a reasonable price to bear for modest (or perhaps elusive) personal gain? Or are we better investing in collective efforts to cure the ills that are around us, sadly on full display?

The Statewide Homeless Council has a clear [plan to end and prevent homelessness](#). It states exactly how to prioritize resources to get the job done. But we need the resources. Will the state join with us to see to it that the few among us who are struggling the most are able to access health care, treatment and housing so that they, too, can become productive members of our society? Or will our state point fingers at people who are struggling, cut programs, provide inadequate support and leave us all to experience the negative results? I think that will be the big question for Maine this year.

I would like us to spend our money wisely and proactively to help people achieve their highest capability and be successful as part of our society. We know what it looks like to have people left out, and it looks ugly. Let's bring ourselves to be the state that cares enough to bring them back in. We know from research it will cost less, and we know it will be better for each person experiencing homelessness. But I think we also know it will be better for all of us, too.

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