

Maine Voices: Forward-thinking policies put Portland on path to ending long-term homelessness

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By Cullen Ryan Special to the Press Herald

Portland City Manager Jon Jennings has [proposed](#) that housing developers using city funds agree to set aside 10 percent of units in resulting developments to house people who have been languishing in city homeless shelters.

I think it is a brilliant strategy.

about the author

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When placing people in its properties both in and out of Portland, Community Housing of Maine has gone out of its way to seek and house those who have been homeless the longest – and the results have been nothing short of amazing. The city’s staff have done an outstanding job referring tenants who turned out to be a good match for each property, and have provided more-than-adequate support services to ensure the success of each resident.

The most compelling result is the transformation of the individuals served. When people were moved directly from years and often decades of homelessness right into housing, they changed in front of our eyes.

Three years later, a gentleman who had been homeless for at least 16 years before moving in looks significantly younger already. Instead of drinking on the streets, he is perfecting his hobby of cooking, and makes a regular habit of watching cooking shows with his neighbor, who also came from long-term homelessness. When you stop in to visit him unannounced, there is no sign of alcohol – just a calm, kind, amicable, pleasant individual, now with a short haircut and a nice, neat apartment (with cooking programs on).

In one 30-unit Portland property for people aged 55 and older, Community Housing has housed 24 “long-term stayers” so far. Ten percent would be three people; Community Housing has certainly exceeded that.

Though the property has been open only three years, seven people have died from within this population: evidence of long-term stress and the 25 years of extra physiological age borne by people who endure chronic homelessness. A number of people have moved successfully to other apartments, and 14 people have stayed.

These are all success stories. Even those residents of this building who died did so with the dignity and peace that come with having a home. Not a single person returned to the homeless shelter, and by all accounts, the building is a calm, quiet and pleasant place to live.

How could this be? It has to do with the underlying causes of long-term homelessness. People with serious and persistent mental illness are often psychotic when homeless. This is not surprising: The incidence of psychosis increases with stress, and chronic homelessness is arguably the most stressful situation one can experience (hence, 55-year-olds present like 80-year-olds). But housing nearly erases that stress. And along with that, the incidence of psychosis diminishes.

People do well because, for this population, housing is health care. It doesn’t do it all, but it sets that stage for

success in the community. The rest is a combination of adequate support, and individuals doing their part to be reasonable in the housing – which they do, time and time again.

Portland is on track to be among the first places in the country to end chronic homelessness; we can get there within a year with forward-thinking policies like this. Community collaboration will ensure we will achieve success.

Almost exactly a year ago, nine community organizations came together to help the city solve overcrowding at the Oxford Street Shelter. The goal was to house the people staying the longest. City staff have done much of the heavy lifting, building relationships with sometimes very distrustful people entrenched in homelessness and helping them move into housing.

But the other organizations – including Community Housing, Shalom House, the Frannie Peabody Center, the Milestone Foundation, The Opportunity Alliance, Preble Street, Catholic Charities, Amistad and the Department of Veterans Affairs – have all played significant roles in housing people and keeping them housed with effective support services.

This scattered-site, housing-first model has an 85 to 90 percent success rate across the country. The city’s housing-first placements – 68 in the last year – have done even better, evidence that their support is effective. Out of the 68 placements, they have had only four returns. This is working.

Portland’s city manager is saying, in effect, “Please, let’s do more of this,” and I agree.

There are fewer than 50 people left in the shelter who have been there long-term. It is a disservice to keep anyone in homelessness – it is a major system failure.

I applaud City Manager Jennings’ stance. With everyone lifting, we can easily end chronic homelessness in Maine. Let’s house them all – one at a time. Portland will be better for it.

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