

South Portland begins work to address homelessness

pressherald.com/2021/03/18/south-portland-begins-work-to-address-homelessness/

By Sean Murphy

March 18, 2021

Cheryl Harkins, 62, has been living in an apartment in South Portland's Redbank neighborhood for nearly seven years, but for about seven years before that, she lived on the street, in vehicles and in "hobo jungle," a tent city that used to be in Portland near the Fore River.

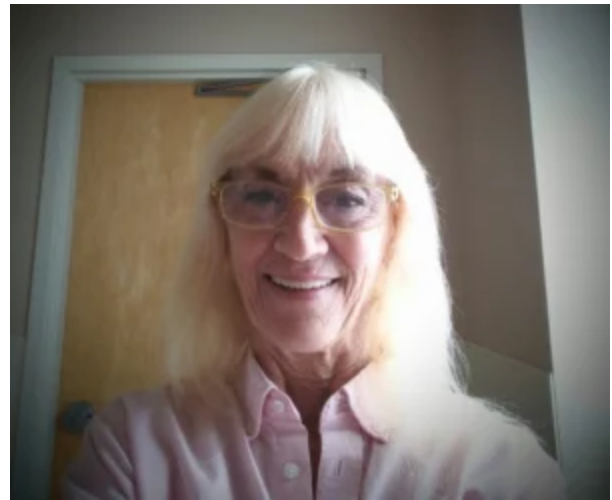
"People think, 'Oh, you're just a drunk, or you're on drugs,'" Harkins said of being homeless. "That's not necessarily the case. There are a million reasons."

The South Portland City Council hopes to help more people like Harkins find housing. The council has responded favorably to a series of recommendations on how to help the homeless in the city, and already there are signs the city is taking steps to implement them.

Among the recommendations is creating a "housing navigator" position within the South Portland Housing Authority, said Assistant City Manager Joshua Reny. The navigator would be a liaison between prospective tenants and landlords, building relationships with local landlords and helping tenants with their housing searches and linking them to other available resources. The navigator position will be added to the proposed 2022 budget, scheduled for public review and discussion early next month, Reny said.

Reny and Councilor Susan Henderson made those recommendations among others in a report they submitted to the council March 8. The report, requested by the council last July, is a summary of their work, in collaboration with housing organizations, homeless shelters, assistance programs and public officials in the greater Portland area, to identify specific homelessness-related needs and solutions.

Reny said it became clear to him and Henderson that homelessness was a problem in the city and required action, but hard data was difficult to acquire. Some people, he said, were "couch surfing," and had no permanent residence but were not on the streets.



Cheryl Harkins, 62, lives in an apartment in South Portland now, but she spent seven years of her life homeless. Now, the city is working to help other people who are living on the street.

Contributed / Cheryl Harkins

He also noted that, especially during 2020, homeless people entered and left the city more regularly due to shelters elsewhere closing and then reopening due to the pandemic, making an accurate count very hard to get locally.

“There’s people moving in and out of the community on a daily basis,” he said.

Statewide data, however, does point to a growing problem. Victoria Morales, executive director of Quality Housing Coalition, a statewide organization that helps find housing for the homeless, said the Maine Housing Authority distributes Section 8 vouchers every year, essentially rent subsidies to qualified applicants. Qualifications vary based on income, but, according to the authority’s website, “MaineHousing gives priority to Maine people who are homeless.”

According to Morales, the state housing authority distributes 12,000 housing vouchers in a typical year, and in 2019, there were 19,000 households on a waiting list, even after the vouchers were distributed. This year, she said, that waiting list has grown to 25,000.



Reny

Cullen Ryan, executive director of Community Housing of Maine, a statewide advocacy and assistance organization for the state’s homeless, said 5,500 people visited homeless shelters statewide in 2020, but more telling is the length of stay. Ryan said that’s measured by looking at the number of “exits,” or people who left shelters and went into housing of some sort. According to Ryan, there were 262 exits in February of 2020 alone, but only 45 exits reported in the same period in 2021.

“It is extremely difficult to find housing, even when people have rental subsidies in hand, so shelters are seeing people stay much longer during the pandemic,” Ryan said.

Among the South Portland reports’ recommendations, Reny said, is supporting applications by housing assistance groups such as Quality Housing Coalition for grant funding to expand their work in the city. The council voted March 16 to approve an application for a \$9,600 community development block grant for Project HOME, a project run by the coalition.

Morales said the project allows coalition workers to act as liaisons between homeless people who have secured rental vouchers and landlords who might be reluctant to rent to homeless people. Morales said often the tenants in question have been in and out of homeless shelters, foster care, and even the criminal justice system. She said the program also helps New Mainers use vouchers to find housing.

“Those are the people who experience the most barriers,” she said.

The program conducts follow-up work with the tenants to make sure they continue to get along with their landlords. Right now, Morales said, the coalition’s program works with three landlords in South Portland, covering about 12 rental units. She said she hopes the funding will allow the program to work with even more landlords throughout the city.

Another recommendation in the report is for “street outreach,” or working, perhaps on a contract basis, with third-party homeless advocacy and assistance programs such as Amistad Maine or Preble Street, which already actively assist the homeless in Portland, Reny said.

He said that upon seeing examples of the work those organizations did, he wondered, “Could we replicate that somewhere in South Portland?”

Henderson, a retired nurse, stressed the need for health care for the homeless. For the mentally ill in particular, there are systemic problems with getting access, she said. Some patients who apply for Medicaid to pay for treatment of a mental illness, for example, can’t get the benefits unless they have an official diagnosis from a health care provider, but can’t get a health care provider to do an examination without Medicaid.

“People fell through the cracks,” she said.

The report also recommends the continuation of a six-week program its fire and EMS departments ran last fall, Henderson said. Paid for by a grant from the Keep Maine Healthy Program, it allowed paramedics to visit local hotels and motels where homeless people were temporarily living and offer basic preventive health care. Henderson said she believed the program helped cut back on the number of police and rescue calls, and she would like to see a similar grant-funded program happen again.

Harkins, who said she uses vouchers to subsidize her rent because chronic back problems are keeping her from working, welcomes any efforts to help what she calls the stigma that attaches itself to anyone who is or has been homeless. Fighting that stigma, she said, keeps a roof over the heads of people like her.

“It’s the only way I can survive,” she said.

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