

The Oregonian

Governor's plan aims at root causes

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Homelessness haunts us -- on freeway ramps, on city streets, by the river. The images remain even as our averted eyes gaze into the distance.

Homelessness is about moms and kids, women and men, the young and old, former soldiers, the mentally ill and addicted. Most subsist in desperation. It's not the life they wanted, living on the streets, in cars, in forest camps, picking through garbage cans or caging spare change from strangers.

Ending homelessness will not be easy. But it can be done. Please indulge me and members of the Ending Homelessness Advisory Council, but we believe we know the way. It's the governor's 10-year plan to end homelessness. It will debut on June 19 at Willamette University, where experts and advocates will gather to reflect on the council's work and craft local 10-year plans to end homelessness.

The aim is to give dispossessed citizens their lives back. The statewide plan lays out a methodology crafted from best practices across the nation, including groundbreaking work done in Portland to help chronic, high-cost homeless people break the cycle between institutions and the streets.

Three main goals frame the governor's plan.

First is prevention and intervention. This focuses on programs that keep people in housing. Its cornerstone is the partnership between key state agencies: the Department of Housing and Community Services, which I manage, and the Department of Human Services.

Second is permanent housing and supportive services. This goal aims to put chronically homeless Oregonians into housing via models that are proved to save money. It includes counseling and support for homeless people and those at risk of homelessness who struggle with addiction, mental illness and re-entry to society from incarceration.

Third is system improvements. Quite simply, this means better alignment of the disjointed services provided by state agencies and by communities throughout Oregon.

Homelessness is pervasive. By the latest available data, almost 745,000 homeless were counted nationwide in January 2005. In Oregon, community action agencies and their social service partners tallied more than 13,000 people experiencing homelessness during January 2007's one-night count.

More than half the homeless in Oregon -- a full 60 percent -- are families with children. A typical homeless family includes a single mother with two children younger than 5. Children and unaccompanied youths represented 32 percent of the homeless, and of those 68 percent are age 11 or younger.

What the public generally sees is the 24 percent of the homeless population who are single men and the 10 percent who are single women -- many of them struggling with addiction and mental illness -- plying our city streets.

Poverty, addiction and mental illness all are contributing factors. And solutions are not easy. Members of the Ending Homelessness Advisory Council have no illusions about the difficulty in taking on this challenge. But they have moved well beyond the stereotypes and platitudes that bedevil this issue.

By adopting the governor's plan and adequately funding it, Oregon can end homelessness. It will require the political will of committed state and local leaders, but with such determination in place, we will send the specter packing.

Victor Merced is director of the Oregon Housing and Community Services Department.

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