

**From:** [Sandra Comstock](#)  
**To:** [Council Clerk – Testimony](#); [Commissioner Hardesty](#); [Commissioner Ryan Office](#); [Wheeler, Mayor](#); [Commissioner Rubio](#); [Commissioner Mapps](#); [Sandra Comstock](#)  
**Subject:** Testimony against the Proposal to create forced mass camps and criminalize living in public space City  
**Date:** Friday, October 28, 2022 2:51:27 PM

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My name is Sandra Comstock. I am the Executive Director of Hygiene4all - we are a houseless guided and operated Hygiene, Sanitation, and Safety Hub - funded almost exclusively by foundation grants and individual donations.

In April of 2020 I joined hands with Pride Northwest, The Equi Institute, the PDX Trans Housing Coalition, R2DToo, Gather: Make: Shelter, and Street Roots to create infrastructure and equitable intake and operational processes for 3 VOLUNTARY, self-governed villages of 30 people each in three weeks. I spent another 6 months, on the ground and on call 24/7 supporting the BIPOC and Queer Affinity C3PO Villages. C3PO wasn't perfect. But we learned A LOT working in collaboration with villagers and one another. Sadly no one has reached out to find out what we learned or how it might inform our current circumstances.

**All that aside, I write to you all today to correct Mayor Wheeler's false assertion that banning camping and mass internment in a modern day poor house is a necessary last resort.** Specifically, the Mayor's arguments for the necessity of mandatory Dickensian poor-camps hangs on misleading assertions and omissions that misdiagnose why people remain outside. I appreciate the chance to make my case and suggest how we can do better.

**1. Mayor Wheeler stated the City and County have increased alternative shelter beds in the last 8 months .** This is only marginally true.

In point of fact, in the past 8 months, Commissioner Ryan has delivered just 1 of 6 "Safe Rest Villages," even as the old town C3PO village of comparable size closed down last summer. It is therefore only thanks to WeShine that we have netted 12 new alternative shelter beds since last February.

**2. Mayor Wheeler has justified the necessity of camping bans and "mass poor house" camps by incorrectly asserting that shelter occupancy is at 81% BECAUSE people aren't interested in going inside.**

In point of fact, decisions taken by Commissioner Ryan have actually reduced access to shelter in the last 8 months. By ONLY allowing people who have been specifically referred by Police, Fire, or sweeps navigation teams to become residents of his new Safe Rest Village, he has made getting into his SRV harder, longer, and less transparent. Even worse, at the beginning of last summer the Commissioner's team strong-armed the County into holding back 10% of shelter beds each night, reserving those beds ONLY for people referred by first responders. As a result those beds often stay vacant and inaccessible to the average Joe. Even more problematically, placing first responders as gatekeepers between shelter seekers and shelter beds increases barriers for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ shelter seekers who often avoid officers of the state due to a long history of harm.

Moreover, shelter seekers flounder with no way to find or reserve an open bed by phone. 211 has no centralized, real time information on where or how many beds are available on a given day. Nor can 211 help you make a direct reservation. Instead, shelter seekers must go in person to agencies like TPI and wait an hour just to find out IF there is a bed matching their safety, physical, and emotional requirements.

Finally, disabled, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ seekers and many more find most shelters unequipped to meet their emotional and physical needs or protect them from physical and psychological harm. As I speak we have just 38 LGBTQ affirming shelter beds and 35 BIPOC affirming beds - (forged in the pandemic by our coalition). More generally speaking, few places accommodate people with pets, couples, same sex couples, transgender shelter seekers, neurodivergent shelter seekers, or people managing disabilities or limited mobility. Meanwhile the few residential shelters equipped to help people effectively manage medications, mental illness, and addiction are fully occupied, with months long waitlists.

In short, contrary to the Mayor's assertions, our shelters are not easy or equitable to access. Faulting 6000 unsheltered residents for not using shelter beds when we have less than one third of the beds available is absurd. And we are miles from [knowing](#) and building the kinds and quantity of accommodations people actually want, need, and dream of. In not consulting those experiencing houselessness or those on the front lines, the architects of Proposal 901 have made a grave and dangerous error and decision. Having laid out a series of fixable problems that keep even the most intrepid shelter seekers on the streets, I want to suggest some solutions . One thing is certain, however: Ryan, Mapps, and Wheeler's coercive Frankenstein plan of erasure is NOT the solution. Instead, I offer the following immediate actions that would help.

**Solution 1:** *We can increase the number of alternative villages by changing zoning ordinances, using emergency declarations, and telling housed naysayers strongly and unequivocally that EVERY neighborhood will have to pitch in and share space if they want our **shared** problems to be solved. This is an emergency for all of us. As such it WILL require some give from EVERYONE.*

**Solution 2:** *We can reduce current inequities in access and inefficiencies in use of shelter beds by providing ALL people and advocates seeking shelter the same informational and booking resources only first responders currently enjoy: real time ability to call and identify an open bed matching a shelter seeker's needs and real time ability to directly book that bed right away. This can be accomplished by upgrading the 211 system software.*

**Solution 3:** *We can jettison ill-fitting shelter options, and grow "good fits" by listening and creating the village and housing options people actually want and need. To do so we will need investment in community based, multi-group collaborations with the knowledge and trust required for building small, human scale, culturally and community responsive villages and housing. We will need to invest in planning processes, programming, and activities that bring unhoused and housed neighbors together in joy, hope, and shared determination. Finding and fostering constructive housed and unhoused partners and partnerships isn't always easy. But it is possible. And the rewards of long term mutual regard, understanding, and social ties are ingredients each and every one of us absolutely requires to weather the slings and arrows of life - regardless of status, wealth, or background.*

And guess what: Our communities know how to do this!

We did it during the Compassionate Change Campaign, we did it in creating Hygiene4All and we did it in building community at C3PO ... This is, in fact, Portland's distinctive, yet underutilized superpower.

**Here is a personal story illustrating the reality of our dysfunctional system and what it exacts from those who dare to navigate it**

Four months ago, an employee dear to me (pseudonym "Jerome") asked me for help securing a shelter bed for him and his small dog. He had been ejected from the BIPOC village by the Moda Center for "being too negative" and "questioning staff too much" according to the paperwork they handed him as they showed him the door. I was dismayed, as he had lived without incident for well over 2 years and was an exemplary employee at Hygiene4All.

When I picked Jerome up from the village (within the 24 hour deadline) no employee on site had been working there longer than two weeks on the job; No one even knew which tiny house he lived in.

He had no phone. So I agreed to make some calls. At his request, I first called Bybee Lakes Hope Center, identified myself as the E.D. of Hygiene4All, and was told we would need to visit one of their approved service agents to get a referral. When we sought out the referral - it turned out that Bybee (opened just 2 years ago) could not accommodate Jerome because they had no spaces for people with pets - in a jail that in theory has more space that it can use!

Next, I drove Jerome out to a tiny house village on the edge of town. First, we drove out to fill out an application. Six weeks later they asked us to come out to do an intake interview. Finally we were told we would have to wait more weeks until the psychologist could do a mental health assessment.

Discouraged, Jerome asked me to accompany him to TPI in Old Town to seek a shelter bed through them. I agreed to go with him because he feared going to that area by himself. We drove there 5 days in a row. Each day we waited from 11 AM to 12 PM. Five days in a row Jerome was told there were no pet friendly beds that day. Finally, on our 6th try, a bed opened up at the Naito Parkway Navigation Center.

After 3 long months, Jerome got a bed. He has been there for several months now. Yet to stay there, he had to reduce his belongings to what fits into the equivalent of a gym locker. He sleeps in a bunk bed less than 6 feet apart from other bunks. He endures anxiety from noise at all hours of the night and fear of contracting bed bugs, COVID, and more. Each day he worries about whether someone else's mental health crisis will land on him. His own mental health is deteriorating and his aspirations for a housed future feel even farther out of reach.

He doesn't see his current situation as success. It's more like limbo. In a purgatory of worry, he gingerly treads through each day on thin ice, hoping to ward off conflict, reprimand, or ejection. Yet to the average housed Portlander and most electeds - he is a success many define it: he is off the streets and invisible; out of sight/ out of mind. That's a sad, low, dirty bar to set. We can do better.

As for myself, I cannot continue to fill in the gaps and jerry rig solutions to City and County created problems. I have an organization to run and employees and patrons to support with kindness, patience, hygiene and safety.

Thank you for your time ,  
Dr. Sandra Curtis Comstock

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