

October 30, 2022

Mayor Ted Wheeler
City of Portland
1221 SW 4th Ave, Room 340
Portland, OR 97204

ENTERED
NOV 03 2022
BY:

RE: Proposed criminalization of homeless camping

Dear Mayor Wheeler,

I meant to submit this in time for the council testimony last week, but missed. But I can't let this topic just go by without saying something.

I've been serving the local houseless in inner Southeast Portland (near St. Francis on SE 12th) and a bit beyond for the last three years alone, under my own private steam, despite being disabled by a very painful connective tissue disorder called Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome. (Which is really not that rare, *just rarely diagnosed*.) I'm also autistic with ADHD and traits of OCD with no support, so this hasn't been easy. I went from walking to wheelchair in three weeks ten years ago at 45 years of age in 2012. I can walk again, but not far/ long, and with a cane. I spend most mornings re-assembling my bones (I injure in my sleep, and have to re-assemble myself to be able to move again every morning. Yes, it's very painful.) I'm now a co-author of the EDS Toolkit for doctors. You can read all about that on my blog here later:

<https://ohtwist.com>

I guarantee you likely are, or know someone else with this condition. No kidding. It's really not rare, *just rarely diagnosed* because of medical misinformation, and discrimination against autistic and otherwise neurodivergent people.* (We are often disbelieved.) Most get under-diagnosed with Fibromyalgia and depression. I think I've found the true cause of many cases. ** And women!*

Ironically? I'm finding signs of this condition in *many of the houseless I serve*, which can sure explain a lot of the reason they can't just lift themselves up, either literally (physically), or otherwise (mentally, emotionally). We are almost all neurodivergent (autistic, ADHD, OCD, more) and it's quite a package to manage and wrangle. I'm barely making it on my own in my apartment, but I'm making it by the skin of my teeth. (I have a BA and used to run my own business and own my own home before 2012.)

And, I've learned several things in the process of serving that make *putting folks into congregant camps or shelters even with wrap-around services* and supports, but especially **criminalizing camping**, *a really bad idea*.

NOV 03 2022

BY:

First off, the vast majority of the houseless I meet are disabled in some way - many physically, often with many signs of my connective tissue disorder and all that entails as already mentioned - as well as mentally, with PTSD, CPTSD, depression, anxiety, autism, ADHD, schizophrenia, OCD and more. (Often both, which is why we cope and fare so poorly.) As well as by all the addictions these often entail, and we all know well - alcohol, meth, heroin, more. (Folks are mostly just self-medicating ADHD and pain of all kinds - mental and physical - in the absence of proper care and support from what I can see.)

But you can't understand why they can't just get services and get off the street. Well... *as you know,*

I'm here to tell you that because you keep sweeping people around, they literally keep losing their phones and ID and connections to what little support they had mustered. And the few precious items they were trying to hold on to. Then, you punish folks for not accessing services. Which they can't do without... (drum roll please)... their phones and ID. So, just as they're starting to recover from the last sweep, start getting their ID back, get a phone, and find some where or way to keep it charged (another HUGE obstacle for folks outside), you sweep them again. And you want to criminalize camping, as housing costs go up, services go down or are spread thinner, and more folks can't keep up and become unhoused? And they are also robbed more easily than you lucky housed folks, also lending to the challenge?

This City is more heartless than I thought.

Sweeping should be criminalized. Not camping.

Failing to support houseless people in need should be criminalized. Not camping.

Failing to open up perfectly good housing units to the poor and disabled in order to maximize profits and greed should be criminalized. Not camping.

Furthermore? The few working housing services and projects there are have years-long wait lists. So even if you do get on one, well, take a number. A really really long high number. It's gonna be a few years. I know, because they've told me so. (One had a caseworker steal her benefits.)

Only a very rare few break through/out for many reasons including all the above.

Many literally die waiting unbeknownst to you. Not exaggerating a bit.

But you wouldn't know this, because you've never bothered to get to know your local houseless neighbors. You just see them as a "problem" to be swept away out of sight. That is, as less than human.

But Jan, that's why we want to put them in supported camps - they can stop being swept.

NOV 03 2022

BY: _____

I know, that sounds like a good idea. But here's the problem with *congregant* (concentration) shelters and camps of *any kind* for many of the houseless:

You have a mix of the *mentally ill, traumatized*, drug addicted, plus criminal elements *all co-mingled* with no walls, bars or barriers between them. Your schizophrenics can't be around many other people. (And vice versa.)

Many rape and other abuse victims *will be housed with some of their rapists or abusers*. (Please hear Tera's story - she was nearly killed last week once again. But she's too autistic and traumatized to testify. My friend R used to lay hiding on a piece of cardboard under a tarp by choice for this reason before I helped her get housed - you couldn't tell anyone was there. Put her in a camp? Her ex would find and kill her. Not exaggerating. *She was homeless for a reason.*)

Again, please check your privilege of all kinds, especially as an (en) abled rich white cis-het male, thank you.

A lot of autistics and other neurodivergent folks (including me) are also natural targets for users and abusers. And many are LGBTQIA+ and have been *hated and rejected by their families of origin*. So, *they're often quite traumatized and abused and hated to begin with*, and you want to put them in camps with other folks, *some of whom are often just as hateful toward them?* (Some who would even murder them?) *I don't think so!*

★ You are literally mixing up both a mental hospital, with a jail system - in an *insecure camp*. With insufficient support and staffing I'm sure. (Ask your local jails how well they would run using tents. That's what you're proposing.)

Camps with tents are inherently *insecure*. You cannot "lock" your tent. *Folks often have to pay a neighbor in cigarettes and more* (sometimes sex) *to watch their tent* while they go shopping, to the doctor, or the loo. *Some just can't*, and again, have their stuff stolen or destroyed by other houseless folks, whether from criminal intent, or just mental illness. (Tweakers will sometimes go on destructive rants and destroy all they see in front of them as you may know.) And you can get knifed easily through them. *All of my houseless friends have been attacked at least once or more outside*. If only they could lock their gates and doors like you...

But Jan, we would have security in the camps.

Trust me, you can't control enough behavior in these places to make it work. You just can't. You aren't willing to pay the true cost of staffing and running it to be truly safe. You are living in a fantasy world where everyone is just "unfortunate" and will suddenly start behaving because you gave them somewhere to be. Like, this is a nice idea if you carefully vet and select the occupants, but then *you are discriminating against the most disabled - again.*

NOV 03 2022

BY: _____

It just doesn't work like that, I'm sorry. In fact, you will likely engender much worse behavior precisely because you just threw everyone into a random group together. (Trust me on this.) You really need a much more trauma-informed approach.

(I highly recommend this August 2019 broadcast called "Understanding Childhood Trauma" on OPB's Think Out Loud about providing trauma informed care if you haven't yet, it's very enlightening for everyone:
<https://www.opb.org/radio/programs/think-out-loud/article/rebroadcast-understanding-childhood-trauma/>.)

Also, not everyone actually wants to be sheltered. Really. Some of my houseless friends don't like being indoors - literally. Or in groups at all. (Thank trauma for this again.) But we don't allow or support outdoor living away from others. At all.

Further, these camps will isolate some of the most vulnerable people from the wider community. They seem designed for one thing only: to get the houseless out of sight, and thus out of your mind and off your property. So you can go on with your very privileged life unbothered by your less fortunate rejected family members. (We really are all just one big giant dysfunctional family, truly. Open your heart and mind and again - check your privilege and reclaim your family members, starting by actually talking to them personally while providing some material support like savory warm food or a tent or blanket or gloves. They don't bite! You might even make some new friends. I sure have.)

The same thing is true for the congregant warming and cooling shelters we provide every year: many houseless are often too disabled to actually get into them. And even if they can (yes, I know about getting rides via 211), you're asking them to leave their tent or belongings behind, unsecured. And sleep among other mentally ill or otherwise difficult or dangerous people. (Some rapists and abusers will stalk their victims in these shelters, knowing they are likely to be there.)

Else, they have to carry all of their belongings with them which is hard even for abled folks. I know, because I serve all those left behind stuck outside for the reasons I just mentioned. (Boy are they glad I do!)

I can't even carry a backpack with my condition. Much less a tent and all my stuff. I'm currently trying to find my houseless friend Frank who is stuck in a wheelchair with no tent, so I can give him a rain cape at least since the weather turned. He keeps getting attacked and robbed. And you wonder why he can't lift himself up??

Please break out of your very ableist limited world view, and join me in re-thinking this issue.

I really appreciate that you want to do something more meaningful than repeated cruel sweeps.

But criminalizing mentally ill and neurodivergent folks who truly can't help how they are and can't live in such congregant camps safely? Is just as cruel. Even if you would end up jailing the

NOV 03 2022

few bad elements. You will end up jailing the mentally ill and disabled more. ^{BY:} ~~And jail is no place~~ for folks who need mental health and addiction support, medication and medical care, and trauma treatment. Among other things. It's just not.

I agree, we have a problem. But I've actually gotten several folk off the streets in my humble work, just by *leading with love*. I simply meet them where they are at, no judgment, *no agenda*, just asking what they want or need, and seeing if I have it or can get it. And I've had multiple people decide they are worthy of better, and lift themselves up off the streets themselves because of this. (I wish I could put you in touch with them. It's been very heartwarming to see.) One friend even quit meth last year of her own volition after her husband got on SSI. They finally have a shred of hope.

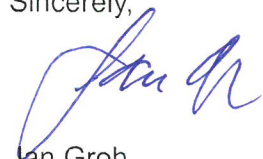
We really need housing first. Truly. *Plus the wrap around services*. But I know this is not the easy answer you want to get a quick hit with the Portland Business Association. I'm sorry, there's just no quick fix, until the better off stop hating the poor and disabled so much.

Please don't throw bad money after good. Please please reconsider this idea, or at least its implementation. At a minimum, please do not EVER criminalize being disabled and impoverished!

I know we want to do "something", but think marathon, not sprint, and start consulting the homeless in the process. And start providing more accessible (literally, and financially) housing units YESTERDAY. (They already exist. The greedy just don't want to share.) The houseless will gladly help guide you as to what will work best if you let them. There is no one size fits all solution, ever. But I know we can do this if we all work together.

Thank you for your consideration and time.

Sincerely,



Jan Groh
3340 SE Morrison St Apt 502
Portland, OR 97214

jan.groh@gmail.com

*I'm really sorry, but there just
is no "Easy Button" for this.*