

March 3, 2020

Clatsop County Board of Commissioners
800 Exchange St., Suite 410
Astoria, OR 97103

Astoria City Council
1095 Duane St.
Astoria, OR 97103

RE: Who is Responsible for Ending Homelessness?

Dear Commissioners, Mayor, and Councilors:

I was recently asked to be an advocate for a homeless person who bounces between Astoria and Long Beach. It was quite a learning experience! I do not have permission to share the details of the story but in a nutshell we started with a social service agency, door 1, and were referred to door 2 (another agency) where we were referred to door 3 who couldn't help (which is implied in all of the following) so we went back to door 2 and from there to door 4 where we were referred to door 5 who referred us to door 6 who suggested door 7 who required us to go through door 8 and from there we took a form filled out by door 8 back to door 6 who said the form was not valid so referred us to door 1 (our starting point). I have left two voicemail messages at door 7 but have not received a return phone call in well over a week. I left one message at door 8 and just heard back after five days. Everyone has been very nice. They express appreciation that the homeless person has an advocate to help navigate the system. The homeless person is still on the street.

This has led me to the question, "Who is Responsible for Ending Homelessness in Clatsop County (or Astoria)?" The answer is, of course, no one.

We certainly have many compassionate social service agencies that are responsible for providing various types of support. For example:

- Clatsop Community Action: "Our Mission is to help people meet housing, food and other basic needs."
- Northwest Oregon Housing Authority (NOHA): "The mission of NOHA is to ensure access to safe, affordable, decent housing for eligible residents of Columbia, Clatsop and Tillamook Counties and to break the poverty cycle by providing opportunity for self-sufficiency."
- Astoria Warming Center Mission: "To provide a warm, safe place to sleep during winter months for people experiencing homelessness."
- Helping Hands: "The Mission of Helping Hands is to provide a helping hand to a sustainable life through Resources, Recovery, and Reentry."
- Astoria Rescue Mission: "The purpose of the Astoria Rescue Mission is to offer assistance, as made available, to those in need."
- Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare: "For more than 55 years, Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare has been caring for the emotional well-being of our community."
- NorthWest Senior and Disability Services: "We are a local intergovernmental agency serving seniors and adults with physical disabilities in five Oregon counties."

My intention *is not* to point fingers at any of these wonderful agencies. They all provide valuable services. My intention *is* to point out that no one is responsible for ending homelessness. To me, having one individual responsible for ending homelessness, with support, is the key driver for a Countywide Homeless Services Liaison. There is a huge difference between convening groups (agencies) to build relationships and share service information — and ending homelessness for Jane, Bill, Fred,... and the other 891 homeless people identified in the 2019 Point in Time count.

“Aren’t there cross-agency groups already meeting?” Yes. For example, Astoria’s Homelessness Solutions Task Force (HOST) has been meeting since late 2017 and has built relationships and is evolving to where they might begin to provide recommendations. CHART, the Community Health Advocacy and Resource Team, has been meeting for ten years to “impact policy, systems, and environmental change to raise the overall health of Clatsop County residents.” In Line, a cross-agency gathering, has been meeting regularly for about twenty years. While extremely valuable, none of these groups are responsible for ending homelessness.

“Are there examples of success in other areas?” Yes. By now, many have heard about Gresham Oregon’s success with drastically reducing homelessness through compassionate support-in-action along with enforcement. The effort has been led by Kevin Dahlgren, Community Health Services Advisor. Kevin has the power to convene alongside the power to influence needed system changes including development and/or city code. He has been able to “find” housing where people believed no housing existed. Community Solutions *Built for Zero* Collaborative provides consulting to communities and counties across the country to drive chronic and/or veteran homelessness to functional zero. The key is an integrated data system used to track individuals between and among agencies. No more blind referrals; no more falling through the cracks. The March 3rd *Astorian* editorial outlined several useful actions: a year-round homeless shelter (what we have been calling a drop-in resource center), transitional housing, land-use changes, and for enforcement, exclusion zones.

My major points can be summarized as (1) the current approach within our city and county has not and will not solve the problem and (2) proven solutions are available. It’s time for committed action.

Sincerely,



Rick Bowers
PO Box 1406
357 Commercial Street
Astoria, OR 97103
(916) 622-4501
bowers@speak-peace.com

cc: Betsy Johnson, Senator
Tiffany Mitchell, Representative
Don Bohn, County Manager
Brett Estes, City Manager