

# Mail Tribune

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Opinion

## Guest Opinion: State is doing what it can to address homelessness

By Pam Marsh

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One story after another in the Mail Tribune describes the many ways that homelessness affects all of us — teachers, cops, social workers, park employees, shopkeepers, bus drivers, ODOT workers, newspaper reporters, family members and residents — in heart-rending and often frustrating experiences.

The homeless adults that we encounter on sidewalks in parks are just the tip of the iceberg. The 5 percent of children in our schools who are without stable homes are less visible. It is hard to understand how we could let this happen at a moment when employment is peaking and economists tell us we are well off.

We should and must do better. But I take issue with the Mail Tribune's contention that the state has abandoned its responsibility to help communities address the issue. We have not done enough, but we have done what we can. We will continue to do more.

Changing the trajectory of homelessness will require local communities, state governments and (don't count on it) Congress to step up. And yes, it will require new revenue.

Here's a broad-brush look at the intertwined issues:

**Housing:** Oregon has a housing deficit of approximately 155,000 units. Housing starts plummeted in the 2007-'10 recession, but the state didn't stop growing. The pressures caused by the housing shortage fueled rent increases and accelerated home values, often sending people on the edge to the street. It is not hyperbole to describe this situation as a crisis.

Housing was a priority for the 2017 Legislature. We approved \$80 million in bonding for low-income housing programs, \$25 million for the preservation of

existing affordable housing, and \$1.3 million for foreclosure assistance. We allocated \$40 million for emergency housing — four times the amount spent in the prior biennium.

In 2018, we approved an increase in the document-recording fee that will produce \$60 million/biennium for affordable housing, ownership assistance and emergency housing. We also added \$5.2 million for emergency assistance. ACCESS will receive a \$228,000 allocation for a family shelter from this funding.

Mental health and addictions treatment: The Office of National Drug Control Policy estimates that 30 percent of people experiencing chronic homelessness have a serious mental illness, and around two-thirds have a primary substance use disorder or other chronic health condition. The actual numbers could be much higher.

Oregon is 50th among the states in access to addiction treatment and, with a higher than average demand for mental health services, we fall short in meeting those needs as well.

The good news is that we have incorporated mental health services in primary care clinics that serve Medicaid clients, making access to care easier and faster. And with the passage of Measure 101 in January, our Medicaid system has full funding for the rest of the biennium.

Understanding that we need to transform our treatment system, the Legislature has instructed the state's Alcohol and Drug Policy Commission to develop a plan to improve public addiction services. Once we have a plan, we have to identify funding. In the meantime, we need to build public support for the significant investment that real change will require.

Revenue reform: It is easy to second-guess budget decisions. But the reality is that Oregon faces a structural revenue problem that began with the passage of Measure 5 in 1990. Without fundamental change in our taxation strategy, every budget decision is a Sophie's choice.

If we want to provide stable, sufficient and long-term support for the services that Oregonians want and need, including those for our homeless, we have to face up to the fact that the tax system that we created nearly 100 years ago is no

longer adequate or equitable for our 21st century needs.

In 2017, we worked for months with legislators from both parties, business leaders, and labor leaders to pursue a tax reform package that would have increased revenues by \$1.4 billion/year and decreased the individual income tax, along with implementing PERS reform and cost cutting measures. This would have been a game changer, but the legislation fell a vote short.

Absent change, it would be easy for us to fight over limited dollars. But pitting seniors against preschoolers and college students against people experiencing homelessness seems like a bad way to solve problems or build strong communities. The revenue reform debate will return in 2019, because it must.

Addressing homelessness is going to require all of us to work together to make change happen. The discussion begun by the Mail Tribunes editors is a step in the right direction.

*Rep. Pam Marsh, D-Ashland, represents District 5 in the Oregon House of Representatives.*