

Finding Home: A True Story of Life Outside

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Executive Summary

In March of 2018, AllCare Health agreed with journalist Julie Akins to determine the conditions and circumstances of homeless residents in Josephine, Curry, and Jackson Counties. The project goal was to collect the stories of the unhoused in their own words as a tool for needs assessment, determining causes of homelessness, and identifying possible solutions.

The collaboration also resulted in the dissemination of information, narratives, and powerful portraits of the unhoused and their living conditions for AllCare and its many partners to better understand and assist the unhoused.

In the end, we interviewed more than 300 unhoused people in a cross-sectional survey that considered demographics, length of time being unhoused, and financial circumstances.

This work to be known as “A Place to Call Home” assisted AllCare Health in humanizing the homeless and shedding light on the social determinants of health for those living rough.

As a result of this work, AllCare was able to make headway in creating resources for the unhoused up to and including more physical locations for the unhoused to dwell both short and long-term, greater access to health care for the unhoused, and an accepted understanding that while addiction and mental health challenges make everything more difficult, much of the homeless population deals with low incomes and scarce resources for housing as a root cause of homelessness.

In 2022, we revisited this work to see if those experiencing homelessness have changed by demographic or perspective.

What we found were some profound changes:

- The fastest growing demographic of people becoming unhoused are those 55 years and older, across the nation. According to “The Emerging Crisis of Aged Homelessness” by the University of Pennsylvania, the number of seniors facing homelessness will triple within the next ten years. In California, it’s already the fastest-growing demographic and Oregon and Washington are following suit. Our survey confirmed this, out of the roughly 300 people interviewed one-third were 55 years of age or older. This demographic subsists on low-wage jobs and social security, which do not begin to keep up with housing costs or inflation.
- Despite large-scale investments in housing, much of the funding has been around temporary or transitional housing which does not offer relief after six months. To solve the cascading concerns around growing homelessness, we need housing indexed to income and more housing across the spectrum as well as continued mental and behavioral health and substance use disorder assistance. Furthermore, we need permanent supported housing investment at a larger scale than transitional and emergency housing.

- Drop-in services post-pandemic have dramatically decreased and those experiencing homelessness report additional hardship as a result. In speaking with hundreds of unhoused people, appointment-based, locked-door policies have had a profound impact. Unhoused people live with unpredictability due to fewer options for charging cell phones for appointment making and telling time, they are often traveling on foot in various weather conditions and find that they are penalized by losing their place in line if they cannot make it to an appointment on time or at all. Field services and drop-in appointments would make a profound difference.
- From a psycho-social impact, those experiencing homelessness in 2022/23 report they are less hopeful about permanent supported housing and living wage work than they were in 2018. The pandemic contributed to these feelings and the continued lack of housing affordable for people in lower income brackets, according to the unhoused, led to a sense of despair or “giving up” which may present to some as “service resistant,” when it’s more of a loss of faith that anything will change regardless of effort.

Oregon Homelessness- A Perspective

There are facts; data and numbers, and then there are facts as seen in the faces of those who suffer. Since John Steinbeck first noted the grueling and mostly hopeless lives of Dust Bowl Americans in “Grapes of Wrath” we as a society have come to a grim acceptance. We believe as an Oregon mayor once told me, “the poor will always be with us.” We’ve learned to think of it as the natural order.

I might have thought the same had I not met Jay.

Driving home late from work one winter’s day shortly before Christmas I saw a car strike him. He fell to the street, crawled several feet to the sidewalk, and sat stunned. His backpack was askew, his hat was knocked off into the street. The car drove on and the one behind it too. I stopped, pulled illegally into the bike lane, put on my emergency flashers, and sat beside him.

“Are you okay?”

“Did you see that? That dude, he hit me, my ribs are killing me, and my hand...”

He held it up and it was bleeding and already beginning to swell. I helped him into my car and we went to the emergency room. We came to the intake desk and the nurse eyed us with immediate suspicion. I’d never had that happen before.

Jay leaned in toward me and whispered, “They won’t help me.”

We were told to wait outside in the cold. She brought two chairs outside by the door and when another nurse came out to take Jay’s vital signs, he asked him about alcohol and drugs and where he slept.

I was confused.

“He was hit by a car. I saw it. His hand is messed up and he’s probably got broken ribs. Can you take care of that and worry about the rest another time?” I pleaded.

The nurse looked at me and didn’t answer.

“I’ll ask the doctor for an antibiotic prescription for your hand. It doesn’t need stitches. We can’t do anything about your ribs. What you need is sleep and no alcohol or drugs, at least until you heal. Do you have somewhere you can do that?”

I responded, “He can stay with me. Can we get the prescription and go? It’s cold out here.”

Jay lived with my family and me for eight months. He slept, ate good food, got a job, and got a new place to live on his own. But the job turned out to be difficult for his body and the place he was living fell apart when one of the roommates left. The last time I saw him, he was heading back to Los Angeles to see his mom. And a year after that he called and said it didn’t work out. Any of it. I invited him back but he said it was too late for that.

Jay said when he was young, his father would tie him to a tree outside and leave him for dead. He ran away a dozen times until his mother finally left and took Jay with her. But she was an addict, so Jay began panhandling and shoplifting to survive when he was ten. His life never got much better. But it could have. The man who hit him could have stopped. The emergency room nurse could have been kind, he could have been paid enough to not need four guys to a two-bedroom apartment and wherever he lived, opportunity could have existed.

But none of those things happened.

This report is dedicated to Jay and more hopeful possibilities.

Homelessness Roots in Oregon

By the Numbers:

Between 2020 and 2022 the number of people experiencing homelessness in Oregon rose by 23% or 3,304 people, to more than 18,000, according to the federally mandated point-in-time count. (PIT)

Data shows 46% of unhoused persons cited unemployment, low income, and economic reasons such as high rents for their condition of being unhoused. The National Coalition for the Homeless cites: “46 to 60% of unhoused people float in and out of full or part-time work.”

Key factors in homelessness remain a reduced housing stock, notably in households earning at or below the average median income, according to EcoNorthwest.

The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) reports almost 22,000 children in the 2017-18 school year qualified as homeless students under the ODE definition as they lack a “fixed, regular, or adequate nighttime residence.”

Causes at a Glance:

Data also shows high rents are the primary cause for the severity of Oregon’s homelessness crisis.

AllCare reported this in our research project released in 2018 and confirmed it again in 2023. UC Berkeley Professors of Public Policy John Quigley and Steven Raphael (authors of [THE ECONOMICS OF HOMELESSNESS: THE EVIDENCE FROM NORTH AMERICA \(berkeley.edu\)](#)) also demonstrated that housing affordability is the key to predicting the level of homelessness as opposed to personal factors like substance use, mental illness or unwillingness to work. According to Quigley and Raphael, a 10.0% increase in rent, allowable annually in Oregon under rent control, leads to a 13.6% increase in the rate of homelessness. EcoNorthwest affirms the finding, stating:

“Future homelessness reduction strategies would be appropriately scoped if they articulated broad housing production goals and associated rent and vacancy rate targets. Appropriately scoped plans would pull more actors to the table: planning agencies that design and oversee housing regulations, permitting agencies that help determine the pace and nature of housing development, state legislators with land-use regulatory oversight responsibilities, and the region’s Congressional delegation who help determine the scope of federal rental assistance.”

Local politics can worsen homelessness:

Current residents usually like their neighborhoods the way they are. To overcome the opposition, localities would need to hold themselves accountable to clear, broadly disseminated production goals; prune land-use regulations that don’t serve a clear health, safety, or environmental protection purpose; accelerate permit process timetables; explore little-used but promising policies such as land-value or split-rate taxes; and cede regulatory power to the state for some zoning decisions. EcoNorthwest reports what we have found in our data as well:

- Coordinated Care Organizations (CCO) and Community-Based Organizations (CBO) can shortcut some of the thorny issues of local government and increase the supply of affordable housing in the near term, with direct infrastructure funding.
- Shifting the Area Median Income (AMI) qualifying range from 80% to 130% or an even higher range would increase the number of families qualifying for assistance.
- Local governments can evaluate opportunities for additional incentives, such as state-enabled tax abatement programs, fee waivers or reductions, and land write-downs for affordable units.
- They can also identify and remove regulatory barriers that drive development costs up or unintentionally reduce the number of units possible on a site. These include costly parking requirements, building height and bulk restrictions, design guidelines, and requirements for ground-floor non-residential uses.
- Local governments can request landlords revisit their affordable housing screening guidelines which often penalize families and individuals with low credit scores or evictions—rendering too many people ineligible.
- The state can consider creating a rent guarantee program for a longer duration than 90 days or six months administered through CCOs and CBOs that reduces a landlord’s risk of accepting an application from a homeless family.
- The state can better utilize the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program for the construction and rehabilitation of more rental properties.

Defining the problem:

The census of the unhoused, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Point-in-Time (PIT) count, is widely believed to underestimate the scope and severity of homelessness and thus stands in the way of greater funding and prevention.

The PIT count is about whom you find, and so if you don’t try hard to find people or you don’t have enough volunteers, you have a lower count, which impacts funding for the entire community. The unhoused census needs resources adequate to do the job. And if you have people doubling up more, for HUD, your count goes down.

There was one notable, somewhat brighter spot in the most recent federal data: The report shows a decrease of about 18.9% or 248 fewer unaccompanied homeless youth in Oregon. However, even that bit of hope may be flawed; housing instability affects many more children than conventional homeless counts would suggest. The counts show about 2,500 Oregon children have been homeless in recent years. We have learned that is a serious and dramatic undercount. By contrast, school districts in Oregon reported a continuous increase in the number of hungry and homeless children whom they educate.

AllCare’s research indicates in rural communities the PIT is an even greater undercount because there are few or no congregate locations for the unhoused to be counted. The unhoused often attempt to hide their status as unhoused due to negative experiences with law enforcement and sometimes other community members. So, finding them requires knowledge of the community and geography so you know where the hiding homeless stay.

During the pandemic smaller communities suspended their PIT counts, so the numbers derived for statewide records may not have included many of those rural areas.

AllCare’s research indicates the PIT count underestimates by half or more the number of rural unhoused. Based on how many individuals Point in Time census workers assume occupy a tent or vehicle, which is normally one or two, which is far too low of a count. One cannot simply count tents as individuals. Many unhoused people will occupy one tent for security, resource sharing, and warmth. And rarely are RV occupants counted, car campers and those who work during the day are often not in the places where workers can easily identify them for the count. “PIT counts are widely understood to undercount the number of people experiencing homelessness by a significant margin—some experts say by half or more.”—Bloomberg, Alastair Boone

Data Overview

Homelessness has increased by 50% since 2017 throughout much of Oregon, according to Governor Tina Kotek's Executive Order issued January 10, 2023.

At least 18,000 Oregonians were homeless on a single night in 2022, as reported by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's Point in Time Count, which agencies and advocates have long acknowledged as an undercount, especially in rural areas that lack shelters where the homeless are counted. Curry and Josephine Counties in southern Oregon are key examples of places without shelters where the counts are largely undercounted and the unhoused are an unrepresented population.

While the focus on homelessness tends to revolve around metropolitan areas, much of Oregon is rural where homelessness is marked by fewer services and options for housing. That disparity continues because funding tends to follow Point in Time (PIT) Counts, despite the clear flaws in accurate data.

In addition to the historical issues with PIT counts, the data became harder to collect during the COVID-19 pandemic as counts were suspended. According to agencies assisting unhoused people, the pandemic displaced hundreds more workers who fell into homelessness.

In rural counties, the count is likely to be closer to double the recorded PIT numbers, according to those who work with the unhoused and offer services. Our estimates in compiling this report match that of service providers. In Curry County with a population of 23,683, the last statewide estimate by the Oregon Health Authority would suggest roughly 200 unhoused persons or less than 1%, yet the Curry Homeless Coalition which tracks the unhoused from Port Orford through Brookings places the number at closer to between 500 and 600 persons or roughly 2%.

While concepts continue to be engaged such as congregate shelters and urban campgrounds, our interviews and data collection would rate urban campgrounds as the least effective, followed by congregate shelters. Urban campgrounds seek to consolidate services for those sleeping rough, but we found the unhoused resistant to them based on the fact they're still sleeping outside but lack choice about where they sleep, they report the closeness of the tents and the possibility of spreading illness among their concerns as well as restrictions in coming and going which impacts their ability to earn money. They cite a lack of sanitary facilities beyond portable toilets, and they report substandard nutrition due to limited cooking and again, fewer personal choices. In addition, communities tend to be less favorable toward the campgrounds based on appearance, difficulty in placing them in appropriate community locations, noise, smell, and expense.

Congregate shelters, while often used for emergency weather conditions, may be useful for specific short periods but for the long-term, there is a lack of privacy and storage, noise, and public health concerns. Proximity in sleeping areas tends to create difficulties for residents and shelter workers alike. Among those we interviewed, we found that the unhoused living in vehicles reported more autonomy, personal safety, greater freedom, and increased access to services and job opportunities which generally improved perspectives, health, and well-being. Those same sentiments were expressed by those living in converted motels, RV's, and spaces where privacy, storage for personal belongings, and

conventional bathroom facilities exist. Tiny home “villages” that offer similar assets also received positive feedback from the unhoused and the communities where they are located so long as the area’s aesthetics were considered.

Another profound impact on those living in poverty is the threshold for fully covered medical benefits. A single adult (19-64 years) is eligible for the Oregon Health Plan at no charge if they earn \$1,677 per month. A married couple’s income with no children is capped at \$2,268 per month and a family of four may earn up to \$3,450. Many of those we spoke to for this report claim they must keep their income low to qualify for health benefits which makes finding housing extremely difficult. The choice is often housing versus medicine. In the examples you’ll read here, people double and triple up in habitation barely suitable for one person, such as an RV, to survive. Many of them are not counted as unhoused even though their living conditions are extremely challenging.

The data tells a story of widespread homelessness across numerous demographics. We know that homelessness is growing among aging populations as baby boomers find that their social security checks cannot keep pace with the cost of housing but the numbers of homeless youth remain an under-addressed issue as well. The Oregon Department of Human Services conducted a needs assessment of homeless youth in 2021 and calculated some 8,000 unhoused individuals in Oregon under the age of 24. But once again, the numbers are not that simple. 22,336 public school students reported being homeless or were couch surfing or living in motels in Oregon during the 2019-2020 school year, according to the US Department of Education.

According to WalletHub, which tracks incomes in the United States, **24% of Oregon children live in poverty.** Part of the difficulty in collecting data is that individuals attempt to hide homelessness and poverty and a lack of resources devoted to data collection and the ever-changing nature of poverty and homelessness makes accuracy challenging. It tends to vary depending on a wide variety of factors including relationships which may, for a period, alleviate the worst issues of poverty such as shelter. If the data is collected by those in contact regularly like a school counselor, for instance, it’s likely to be more accurate. But no matter which figures you focus upon, homelessness is growing across demographics and a consistent divide in wealth distribution is creating pressure on lower socio-economic demographics which tend to be more concentrated in rural Oregon.

By area, **Curry County has the least amount of housing types, the lowest incomes, and the fewest services for people experiencing homelessness.** The area is also generally known to be the least tolerant of the unhoused according to service providers and those experiencing homelessness. In anecdotal data, reports of being shot at, being chased and beaten, and receiving little assistance from policing agencies are common.

Josephine County and Grants Pass appear to have made large strides since our 2018 survey where homeless people described similar hostility as those in Curry County with violent episodes between themselves and police as well as members of the public. The unhoused now report less contact with policing agencies. **The unhoused are, however, living outside of**

central areas and are directed to locations such as Riverside Park and the hills surrounding the city of Grants Pass making access to service locations more difficult and creating a sense of redlining toward poverty.

Jackson County has the largest response in terms of agency assistance to the unhoused and as a result, has increased its temporary beds and decreased its level of enforcement around homelessness. **Yet Jackson County has still seen a 50% increase in homelessness since 2017, according to the governor's office.** Additionally, one of its largest providers, Rogue Retreat had to re-settle and re-organize which created a temporary need to pull back and re-examine its methodology. As an adopter of the urban campground and congregate shelters, they are considering future best practices that have had a short-term impact on services in parts of Jackson County.

Finding Home

Homelessness Up Close & Personal

Purpose

Finding Home's purpose is not as a data-based survey but one that provides texture in terms of how the unhoused experience their lives.

Our methodology was to go into the field and interview roughly 100 people in various states of homelessness per survey areas of Jackson, Josephine, and Curry counties, or greater than 300 in total. We spoke with people living under the radar too where traditional Point in Time census takers do not go. We interviewed people in abandoned buildings, obscure settings on largely wild lands, rest stops where dozens of families sleep nightly, and in vehicles and RVs parked in closed campgrounds. We spoke to people living under bridges and some who dwell in crawl spaces under houses left vacant in winter months. While data can shed light on the size of the problem, data alone cannot offer a perspective on the nature of the problem from a lived experience.

That's the purpose of this report. What follows will be narratives from the unhoused in their own words describing their experiences. You will *feel* what being homeless is like and as a result, we hope, like us you will also *feel* the need to solve it for as many as possible. For this narrator, there was life before the surveys and life after. One cannot help but be changed by what one has seen.

Introduction

In years past, I'd traveled from Seattle to the Mexican border and east to Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona chronicling the lives of the unhoused, staying in camps, sleeping in my car, and conducting interviews all day, every day for months at a time. I called this project "Understanding Homelessness" and presented my findings throughout the country in public, academic, and social service settings. I did this as a freelance journalist because I was compelled by what I saw; children and parents rising from behind dumpsters to go to work and school, the elderly sleeping in cardboard homes in alleyways, and young people attending college while sleeping in their cars on campus. I called it a "Tsunami of homelessness and poverty" and I believed it to be my duty to report out. It was the biggest story of my 30-year career.

Former AllCare Health employee Sam Engel, current Executive Director of Rogue Retreat, attended a presentation of my work, and in 2018, AllCare Health engaged me to do a similar project focused on Southern Oregon. I chronicled the lives of homeless people throughout the three-county area and offered up individual stories from which we created a document with photos, needs, and the backstory of unhoused people. It was a first-of-its-kind project to ever be commissioned by a healthcare agency. That report was shared with policymakers, providers, and the community at large.

Now, post-pandemic, we pondered a third project to answer the question—what are conditions like for the unhoused in the present time?

So, beginning in the summer of 2022 I sat on curbs and under abandoned houses talking to people about their lives.

I visited people in urban camps, not part of any institution or program, and sometimes feared scabies and head lice because I had gotten them before in my previous surveys. From that experience, I learned never to nap on a park bench or sit on anything with cloth. It's hard to keep your gear clean when there's no hot water and once you're targeted by the invisible but hard-as-hell realities of an infestation, it's an uphill battle of bad-smelling remedies and total body creams. These two health issues combined with the relentlessness of being unhoused cannot be underestimated. It's a lesson in mind-boggling itching, tremendous loss of social contact, and a sucker punch to self-esteem. If you've never experienced it, you cannot know how these two small things add up to a huge amount of trauma. Unhoused people will do nearly anything to avoid it, even if it means refusing possible services. When it happened to me, I felt a huge amount of shame and had to isolate myself until I was healed. I had that option. To this day, if I talk about it I can feel the sensation of itching and humiliation. Had I not been able to leave to get well and come back, I don't know if I would be here today to file this report. That's how breathtaking such injuries can be.

I had also planned to sleep in my car. I didn't know the streetlights would be so bright. I didn't know the noises of cities and towns at night would be so shockingly loud. And I didn't know the back seat of my car would be excruciating to sleep on, with a rod through the middle part of the seat under the cushion which landed perfectly on my L-1 causing a screaming backache that left me hunched and limping the next morning. Throughout the night I'd have to get up and walk the unknown block in the dark just to calm my pain and it felt unsafe and triggered fears of a night predator which I normally never even think of. But when you are sleeping rough, you're vulnerable and survival becomes your obsession.

Sometimes despite trying not to, I'd have to pee in a bottle which wasn't always a smooth effort. I'd find the evidence the following day and confront it with horror and a spray bottle of water and lavender soap. Disposing of a bottle of urine and not getting caught also took some cleverness and disassociation to manage. The odd smells, the sensation of being unclean, the fear of not "passing" in society and the hidden wounds of past illness, fear of everything from scabies to being "caught" created in me a constant sense of being unsettled and unsafe. Even now I often wake in my bed disoriented.

I never got over the fear of being confronted by police or worse, someone who meant me harm. There was rarely any sleep on those nights and sometimes I just drove on and checked into any motel with a 24-hour front desk other times I tried to find a place in the woods but that was no better and, in some ways, worse since the chill of the night and the pain in my body were all I had to focus on. The effort of trying to live rough for even a night or two rendered me exhausted and struggling with coherence. It's also true that these conditions, even when self-imposed, can make you feel a shocking amount of anger from lack of sleep and the absence of simple comforts like warm soapy water and food on demand. I always had options, I could change course with ease. Had I not been able to do that, had being unhoused been my daily, lived experience with no hope of change, I truly do not know how I would have found a way to cope. And I had a car. Without even that level of security, I have no doubt whatsoever that I could not withstand it. I tried tent camping in the cold and couldn't make it through one night. The freezing alone is enough to make life essentially unbearable. The trauma of being constantly on the move to avoid confrontation is so life-limiting that the experience of being outside society would be enough to cause anxiety and depression even for the most avid loner. Add to it the extreme hardship of doing without warmth, food, and a safe place to sleep or go to the bathroom with some dignity and I found it laid waste to a sense of who one is. It also causes bizarre eating disorders and habits of extreme austerity because simply going to the bathroom becomes such an ordeal that I limit my calories and water intake because

I fear it so much. If I ate something that disagreed with me, being unhoused with digestive disorders, I discovered, is a special hell.

I am humbled at the grace of so many who are unhoused.

And the population of the unhoused was nothing like I might have guessed. I found the educated; one woman who had a Master's degree in social work, many others with teaching degrees, and a surprising number of nurses. The beautiful; a mid- 40's blonde whose face had once stared out of full-page ads for guitar straps and young artists who adorned themselves with creative flare, and the solid citizens like a fifth-grade teacher and her machinist husband who lived in their SUV after their home was wiped out by an east coast hurricane which drove them westward in panic.

It foretold of something *off*. These were not the people who *should* be homeless.

So, with two projects under my belt, I figured I'd be good for a third and AllCare Health and I inked a deal which led to this report.

Please don't breeze through it. It cost me and those with whom I spoke a great deal. We hoped collectively to reach out to you, to touch you, to bring to you a greater understanding. I heard often the pleas of those I interviewed-'please tell people I'm not some drug-addicted criminal, I am a person who never thought I'd be out here on the streets. I'm a good person and I need help.' I learned this: **Once unhoused, it is not possible to become housed without help.**

I spent time in each community, staying in some a few weeks at a time. I didn't deny myself the opportunity to interact however it came most naturally. I was there to learn about the lives of the unhoused in current America which didn't preclude forming relationships but instead demanded connection. The only thing I didn't do was give anyone money. I couldn't pay for their stories because I couldn't risk a more fantastic version of reality. If I paid, I knew some people would want to give me my money's worth and others might view it as a part-time job which would affect the credibility of this project. But I could give rides, split a meal, or let people take refuge from the rain in my car while we talked.

And I also let people speak for as long as they wanted. These were people sharing trauma, many cried, some yelled, some had to take breaks and a few asked if they could meet me again at another time because it was too hard. Some let me take their full names and photos and some did not, fearing the shame of homelessness would follow them.

In the pages ahead, you will read the true stories as they were told to me and as I experienced them. It's our hope, mine and those who spoke with me, that through this project you may come to understand that fewer and fewer people are beyond the possibility of becoming unhoused. The belief that a job will spare us from homelessness or that our family and community ties will bind us to a stable home is not accurate according to those with whom I spoke and whom you'll meet through their testimony.

In the beginning...

I set out to begin my understanding of low-wage living and poverty deep enough to cause homelessness in Jackson County.

It could have been out of laziness or just wanting to start close to home, but I notice any time I set out to drop myself into the lives of the homeless, it takes some drawing up of courage. The approach is always the same: “Hi my name is Julie and I’m a journalist, I’m researching the lives of the unhoused or precariously housed so I can better document what people need and let policymakers know how they can better address those needs.” And with each person I approach, I expect rejection. To my way of thinking it’s hard enough to be homeless without some outsider prying into how and why that’s happened.

But on this day and every day since, that has rarely happened. I began my interviews at a community meal, often referred to by the unhoused as “feeds.” I typically carried with me snacks, water bottles, and new socks. Sometimes I had camp gear and other items given to me to share. Without exception, people who accepted my gifts also grabbed extras to share with people in their group. If they took five pairs of socks, they gave them away. Generosity is a common trait of unhoused people.

“Chris” is among the first people I spoke with. He’s a 55-year-old man who makes most of his income on recycling and part-time labor jobs which he uses to pay for campsites. But he informs me even tent camping locations have increased their prices. “It used to be you could put up a tent just about anywhere for a few bucks a night, now it’s 20 or 25 dollars so even that’s become out of reach. That was my way of staying legal the last time I was out here. Now I’m just some old homeless dude, at least that’s how people see me. I’ve only been out here for two weeks this time but it might as well be forever.”

Chris says he has trouble maintaining relationships, and when he’s single he doesn’t earn enough to pay for a place to live. Single individuals are the highest number of unsheltered people in America. And people over 50 make up more than 30% of the unhoused, according to recent studies and my observations.

“As I get older, people are less patient with me,” he explains as he looks away trying to avoid eye contact. He was working part-time and spending the rest of his time taking care of his aging and ill mother with whom he has a difficult relationship.

He earned enough to pay his half of the rent, but he had no savings. “Without the money for a deposit, I can’t even rent a room in a house that goes for a thousand bucks a month, if you can find one. And since I’m out here looking grubby, who’s going to give me a break? Honestly, I’m pretty nervous about it.”

He’s been applying for jobs, but he hasn’t been able to get a callback. “Most of the time I don’t catch the attention of anyone unless it’s to throw me out of somewhere.”

He describes the time he bought clothes from Goodwill: a white shirt, tan slacks, and shoes in hopes of making a good impression. “I even shaved in the library bathroom, which they frown on but I couldn’t go out looking for a job all shaggy.”

Chris went to every bar and restaurant, every landscape company, and a few construction places filling out applications by hand and hoping to speak to a manager. Only one came out to talk to him and he asked if he would be able to make it to work every day. Chris believes that's because the manager figured he was unhoused. "I guess he could just see it on me. I tried to get my hands clean and look good but my backpack gave me away. I wanted to have my paperwork in case I got hired. But when he asked me that, I knew no matter what I answered, I'd probably not be getting a job that day."

The reality is that even if he landed a job, it was no guarantee of finding housing. Most traditionally labeled "unskilled" jobs start at \$15.00 an hour. "If you're not already housed, that's not enough money to get you into a place, certainly not by yourself. I guess I was just hoping," he tells me.

You'll be hearing a lot about people living a low-wage life in the pages ahead. Not making enough money to pay the rent is a common theme across geography and any age, although it's striking how many older people are living outside now as compared to a decade ago.

The math of homelessness is especially difficult for people over 65 or those on fixed incomes. Social Security alone is not enough to maintain a household in 2023 dollars since the average is less than \$1500 per month for low-wage earners and private pension plans are rare. Add to this the number of people who lost equity and homes in the 2008 housing collapse and you will find older people clattering down the street in walkers and wheelchairs, rising from a tent or the backseat of a car. Additionally, rental prices across the board, but especially in Jackson County and the entire West Coast have risen between 8 and 14% annually since 2016.

"It's rough out here," Chris tells me. "It's an asylum. There are so many people barely hanging on. It's hard not to lose your mind when you see so much wealth and you just want a warm place to sleep and a job that keeps you from going hungry, but you can't get that no matter how hard you try. I don't think there's any way to prepare yourself for that," his voice trails off.

When I left, Chris had begun to concede that maybe he'd have to move in with his mother as her caregiver. He claims their relationship is severely strained and there's a background of abuse involving him as a child, but he may have to do it anyway, he said. He counts himself lucky that he has a mother who will take him in, no matter how difficult it may be.

"I'm not making it. I need to be housed to be housed. How crazy is that?" he says to me followed by a long silence.

"David" is 61 and has been housed in a rehabilitated Super Eight Motel run by a nonprofit which calls itself "Options for Helping Residents of Ashland", OHRA. Under federal guidelines, people can stay there for six months. He's used the time to catch up on life, find a job, and begin saving money. I'm sitting across from him on a break from work where he busses tables, washes up, and does basic maintenance. "I never say no to anything. I'll do any work, take any shift, and try to make myself indispensable," he says with pride.

He's an attractive man with sandy hair in a ponytail, tall and slender wearing a flannel and jeans. His sturdy shoes look nearly new. "These are my transportation," he says jokingly.

He smiles easily. While we're talking, co-workers have come by to say hello and ask when he's back on shift. He's liked by those he works with and he says his boss gives him as many hours as he can, but still, he's concerned about the upcoming winter and timing out of OHRA. "I'm ex-military and if I have to live outside, I can do it better than most, but it's not a life," he confesses.

He moved west from Indiana planning to go to Eugene in search of an intentional community. "I'm seeking diversity and connection. I'm attracted to college towns for the youth and open-mindedness. I came here looking for bartering and balance." But he didn't find it. The hype about Ashland being a "hippy town," David says, didn't pan out.

He earns \$15.50 per hour and works roughly 30 hours per week, which he knows is not enough to find housing. "The price of rent since the 2008 market collapse is too high. Tax-paying, hard-working people are losing housing. I think there's a lot of price-gouging, they're overcharging for rent. I see people losing their homes and those homes remain empty. It doesn't make sense," he tells me while pointing to his temple in frustration.

And while he's grateful for the help, he's critical of the way the system works:

"These facilities are filling the beds with life-long drug addicts. I get that people need help, but those of us who are suffering from economic realities need spots too and it's harder to find. I don't think it should be that way," he says in frustration punctuated by a long pause, "I'm not the only one out here sober and working."

And it's accurate that due to past assumptions about the causes of homelessness: addiction and mental illness thought to be the reasons, funding streams around helping the addicted and mentally ill populations are more robust. And it's also fair to say that with prolonged time on the streets, those considered "chronically homeless" develop co-morbidity with trauma-induced mental illness. If we house them before that happens, housing would be less expensive and so would medical treatment. But beyond that, we would be saving a person from life-long trauma.

Fewer solutions have been historically created for those who find themselves on the street due to economic factors only. As research is updated showing that the cost of housing connects to homelessness, this has the possibility of changing.

Robert, A Young, single father in his 40's has a child in pre-school and another in high school. The 15-year-old, high schooler works 20 hours per week to help pay the rental space in their RV Park in Brookings. Because he can't afford childcare, the father tries to pick up gig work between his daughter's job and her school. "I think we're going to have to move back to Portland. It's hard there too and I hoped to offer the kids something more rural, but in Portland, I can make 30 dollars per hour, and we can stay in my sister's spare room. It's not much, but it's a better life than this," he tells me while waiting in line at the Department of Health Services to find out if he can qualify for additional food benefits. When his wife died, they went from barely getting by to not getting by. Robert's an example of the trials in subsisting in rural Oregon below the poverty line.

Researcher Clayton Page Aldern who wrote the book, "*Homelessness is a Housing Problem*" published by the University of California Press, underlines this point by saying public policy is scattershot with some communities focusing on mental health and addiction while others looking at housing prices and scarcity. While he doesn't deny that addiction and mental health play a role, he believes the vast growth in unsheltered populations on the

West Coast demonstrates the fact that housing costs and lack of policy around it are a bigger factor than previously thought:

“...The point is, there are people who are addicted and mentally ill in Chicago, and Chicago has one-fifth the homelessness of Seattle and San Francisco. So what’s going on here? The point is these individual vulnerabilities interact with housing markets to produce homelessness.”

It’s without dispute that for anyone earning less than \$23.00 per hour, working fewer than 40 hours per week, or making roughly \$50,000 per year, it’s extremely difficult to afford traditional housing anywhere in our study area of Southern Oregon. For those in two-income households sharing rent, it’s possible to earn a standard unskilled wage of \$17 per hour per person and split the rent. But a change in relationship status for any reason can result in one or both parties becoming unhoused.

Even with that \$50,000 per year, the individual income threshold is difficult to find in rural communities whereas it’s more achievable in metropolitan areas. And the cost of housing in rural Southern Oregon is not substantially less expensive than Oregon’s only major city of Portland.

In Portland, the median home price is \$536,000 as compared to Jackson County where home prices have dropped slightly to \$440,000 with exceptions like Ashland which is roughly \$583,000, according to Zillow. In Josephine County, it’s roughly \$400,000 to purchase a house and in Curry County, the median is between \$400,000 and \$500,00.

That data assumes home ownership. Rental costs between Portland and Southern Oregon are similar. The average rent in Portland is roughly \$1,700 per month which is the same in Jackson and Josephine Counties. In Curry County, it’s \$1,900 primarily due to scarcity of available housing.

While it may be slightly less expensive to buy a home in Southern Oregon, it’s harder to rent one. And incomes don’t keep up in our study area in any of the three counties. Curry County residents are the hardest pressed as they earn less and pay more for housing.

The average hourly pay in Portland is about \$33 per hour while it’s roughly \$18 per hour in Jackson County, \$17 in Josephine County, and in Curry County, the median pay is roughly \$16 per hour. And it’s not yet fully clear what the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be. We know employers have had a more difficult time finding employees willing to work on-site, and willing to accept changing schedules and lower pay. In large measure this is due to the economic reality that a \$17 per hour job at 25-30 hours per week without health benefits is not enough to be housed, but too much to qualify for low or free medical care and electronic benefits transfer (EBT) cards which assist with food.

The dilemma of balancing just enough income to still receive benefits is of a constant concern for low-income Oregonians. Many have suggested changing the threshold rules to better reflect current costs.

This is the knife's edge on which the rural, working poor balance.

Joshua is among those trying to make this balance work. He's a 39-year-old man who suffers from a late-onset diagnosis of epilepsy. "I didn't know I even had it but the seizures kept coming and getting worse," he tells me, still incredulous that it struck him roughly ten years ago.

He works at McDonalds for \$15 an hour and works roughly 25 hours per week, he can't go over or he'll lose benefits. His mother drives him to and from his shift daily. He'd like to work more hours. He'd like to have a better-paying job too, but unless it offers him comprehensive health insurance, he can't do it. He makes just little enough to qualify for medical benefits from the state which includes his prescriptions.

"I take three prescriptions per month and each one costs about \$1,200. Without them, I would die. I can't afford to make too much and lose that," he tells me with resignation.

Joshua also cannot afford rent on his own and he can't drive due to his seizures so he lives with his mother in a small RV without warm water. "We boil water on the stove to clean up or I can use the shower at the campground. It's not ideal but it works well enough for now."

He aspires to qualify for a subsidized two or three-bedroom apartment for himself and his mother so he might have some privacy. If his housing were closer to his work, he could also have some independence by using a bus or walking.

"This isn't the life I was planning," he tells me as he looks off into the horizon of the blue sea in Gold Beach where he's helping his mother volunteer in a food drive. "I was going to college. I had all kinds of life I was expecting. But this is what I got," he tells me. But he also expresses gratitude for his mom and extended family with whom he shares a warm relationship. "Without them, I doubt I'd be alive."

His warm brown eyes are wet. His strong frame under layers of sweaters shivers and he wraps his arms around himself as if to say that he needs protection or perhaps a hug. I offer him an embrace and he accepts, warmly. Standing in the parking lot, the wind rushing past us, I feel his steadiness and hope. He's not giving up. I look up at him when we separate and his jaw is set in resolve. He's knocked down but not staying down. Perhaps the difference is the love of his family or something within him that renews his intentions.

"If I could get a job that had really good medical insurance, I would jump at it, but that's very hard to find if you're a regular working person. And now, since I'm at McDonald's, the assumption is that's my skill level," he tells me. "I'm still hopeful. You never know. I didn't see this coming when it hit so maybe it will improve in a way I can't see coming too." He smiles and goes back to signing people up for food assistance and waves as I walk away.

A safe place ...

I'm sitting under a canopy in the parking lot of Options for Helping Residents of Ashland (OHRA) avoiding the mid-day sun with a circle of roughly ten to twelve unhoused people who come and go. We're sitting outside this homeless shelter in folding chairs. Some are smoking and others are just there to socialize. Among them is a man rendered largely speechless since having a stroke. He's quiet, not smoking, and slightly outside the group while still being connected to it. I wonder if this is what it's like for those who suffer from a brain injury like a stroke: wanting to fit but not being sure how.

There's something anxious about him as he looks around when people speak as if he's having to work hard to understand what's going on. But he's still making the effort and sometimes he'll smile at the right time. His smile is cute, a little crooked, but wholehearted. He's trim and fit, in otherwise good shape, his hair is short with silver weaving in between the blonde and his face is slightly tanned with few wrinkles for a man who's said to be in his sixties. His clothes fit well, he's tidy. He appears to have taken good care of himself before his medical crisis.

One eye is cocked and sightless and his friends say he struggles to remember meal times. One arm appears weak and mostly limp and his gait is uneven.

How he found the shelter, some say is unclear and others claim he was "dumped" there by the hospital, but it came about he's got a room for now along with the 49 others currently sheltered there. I decided against putting him through the strain of attempting an interview. Those near him have whispered to me that his speech is slurred and he rarely speaks as a result.

Traumatic brain injury, like the man with a stroke, is surprisingly common among the unhoused. According to studies aggregated by "<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>," 53% of the unhoused or precariously housed population have traumatic brain injury (TBI), of which stroke is considered a part, and roughly 22% have severe or moderate TBI which not only affects basic functioning but cognitive abilities too.

Here in real time, I see the statistic as a fact that affects people in and out of the circle.

Alan, a 53-year-old man with dark, curly hair is sitting on the curb near the front doors of OHRA hoping for a room or any help he can get. A former surgical nurse, he understands the difficulty in serving the burgeoning population of unhoused people who, like him, have a disability so he expresses no animosity about the lack of room at the moment.

"It's okay. I can come back," his voice is breezy so I ask if I can interview him for my project. He taps the spot next to him and signals me to have a seat.

"Work was just really tough and I was thinking of shifting, maybe to something else," he tells me while describing the long hours of his former work life.

Things fell apart, he said, when he took a leave of absence and thought some travel and maybe even a new direction in life would be worth considering. He headed to California and for a few days it was everything he

hoped for: car camping, hikes, and long days with nothing but nature and silence until several days into his trip he got to an urban truck stop, he doesn't remember for sure where it was, but it changed everything.

"I stopped and parked off in a corner to get some sleep in my truck," he tells me. "I spoke to this guy earlier, before he came after me and alarm bells went off, but I ignored them. Then when I got out of my truck before getting back on the road, he came up from behind me and smashed me on the head with a hammer." Before the attack ended Alan had been struck 15 times.

He shows me his scar under his hair and it runs the length of his head. It's long and white and wide. It's hard to imagine how he survived it.

He says he could function for a while after initially recovering from the attack but since then it's gotten worse. He describes head pain as a constant seven on the pain scale and claims he's beginning to hear voices. "I'm just worried that I'm becoming delusional. I really need help but I'm not sure I'll get it."

His head cocks toward the road running past us and he stares into my eyes intently. I see a question forming and a seriousness that wasn't there just a minute before.

"Do you hear that? I keep hearing the muffled cries of girls coming from cars like they're being trafficked and need my help," he tells me with anguish. I reassure him I hear nothing and that perhaps it's just his impulse to help people which is causing this. "Yeah, I am like that. I just hope it doesn't get worse," he tells me. "I can't believe I'm hearing things. Everyone tells me they don't hear it but I keep thinking a girl needs my help. Fuck. Am I crazy?"

We sit for a few minutes and breathe deeply until he can calm himself.

Alan receives disability and for a time he was housed in a mobile home but it burned in the Alameda Fire. He's hoping to get a room at OHRA and eventually transition back into subsidized housing where he can receive medical care. He admits that he abuses his pain medication and sometimes uses street drugs when he runs out because the pain, he says, is searing in his body and runs through his head like an electrical jolt followed by an unbearable feeling of pressure. He believes that if he can get proper sleep and the right mix of prescription medications, he could manage his life and maybe even contribute. "I was born to be helpful, but now I can't even help myself. It's so defeating." I lean in and hug him for a time while he softly weeps before he somewhat self-consciously pulls away and grabs his backpack. He waves over his shoulder, then turns around and gives me a second look. His face shifts back to a man with more confidence and playfulness, "We should get a drink sometime," he says smiling. I see that he's a handsome man, someone more used to chance encounters and interactions. I return his playfulness, "Sure, why not?" And within minutes he's disappeared down the road and out of sight. He's left me briefly devastated.

I'm sitting quietly before re-joining the circle. The walk between the curb and the circle is less than a half block but it feels like a greater distance.

The group is passing the time between shifts, some are disabled and taking a break from the mountains of paperwork necessary to line up for benefits and section eight housing, and others are between hours from their first job to the second one.

One young man in his twenties stops by to say goodbye. He's past his six-month allotment of shelter so he's moving into his van where he'll sleep "up on BLM (Bureau of Land Management) land" between his shifts at a local grocery store where he is a checker and stocker of shelves. I ask him for an interview but he declines. "I don't really want to get into it and I got work."

Smoke wafts around me as outdoor ashtrays fill and people offer each other tips on effective paperwork. The star is a former HR Manager who's disabled after a back condition makes it hard to sit for long. She's managed to get disability on one try, qualified for Section Eight, and is soon to receive a voucher and is confident she'll have a place lined up in the three months remaining in the shelter before timing out. She's also managed to stockpile some savings so she can buy an RV if other housing doesn't work out. She's even scoped out a place that will let her rent space.

She dispenses advice to the circle and often helps people fill out forms that tend to be repetitive and obtuse at the same time. "I have a tolerance for the mundane and following instructions," she quips between puffs of her cigarette which she smokes with relish. "It's my superpower."

I pull out a notepad. No one hesitates.

They know I'm there for interviews and many are eagerly interested in telling their stories. One man is visiting his wife who has a room but he doesn't. He sleeps in his car because his social security would put them over the top of the benefit margin to stay there. They don't make enough for an apartment but too much for subsidized housing so he sleeps in his truck while she keeps a room. He's in a wheelchair having lost a leg to diabetes and figures he'll die homeless. "I'm in my seventies and I'm falling apart. It's not like I've got that long left and at this point, I don't mind. If it wasn't for my wife..." He looks off toward the Siskiyou Mountains in the distance. "Maybe you should talk to someone else."

The circle where I speak to the temporarily housed at a converted Super 8 operated by OHRA is a lifeline. The people there, numbering between 49 and 51, are housed in rooms with doors that close and lock and a private bathroom. Their clothes are clean, they are bathed and fed and, in the moment, they are safe. This is the top tier for the unhoused. Most homeless Americans are not in this group. Most are living rough and struggling with all that goes with that: finding edible food, a place to sleep where they won't die in the weather or be harmed, a place to go to the bathroom and wash up.

In this survey, I see older and disabled people, more than in years prior.

With the kitchen window open, blowing in a September breeze in my small home, I can't stop thinking about the people I meet. I hear their stories and I feel them too. The vulnerability of their smiles, and the tilt of their heads when I take their pictures reminds me that they had school photos taken as children and dreamed of good lives. It's crushing.

After a few hours of interviews, and I can only do them for about four to five hours without falling apart, I take a long shower and change into something clean and comfortable and I can't get the smell out of my nose. It can take days or weeks before it eases up no matter how many times I wash my face in aromatic soap. It sticks to you. The anguish clings long after the dialogue has ended.

Sometimes I speak with people in my car for its privacy and it being a comfortable place to sit. But the smell lingers there too. I try not to notice but it embeds itself: a combination of sweat and sickness, of not being able to clean up after using the bathroom, of dirt and sometimes spoiled food. An advocate for the unhoused describes it to me as "The smell of despair and death." And, of course, the people in this situation are aware of this fact about them. It's a source of humiliation and sometimes prevents them from seeking help inside where others will know. They apologize, roll the windows down in my car and one man in particular whom I gave a ride from Brookings to Port Orford, who had planned to walk the entire distance, suggested; "If you're going to give rides to bums, you should keep a towel to put under us so you can wash it and get the stink out. I'd hate to wreck your nice seats." I reached into my back seat and gave him a kit with wet wipes, aspirin, bandages, and water. "You don't bother me, but if it's bugging you, this might help," I handed it to him and lingered with his hand in mine.

He smiled and accepted the gift, "Liar."
I responded, "Maybe."

The sense of being outside of society, of being unable to attend to their basic needs is a wound that converts to long-term trauma for many of the unhoused people I've spoken with. Not being able to be clean is chief among those wounds. Like all people, they don't wish to offend those who might help them.

In the past six years, I've seen hope replaced by despair.

In my first survey, pre-COVID-19 pandemic, I found people with hope thinking that being unhoused was a temporary setback that they would overcome. They expected with a couple of breaks that they'd find themselves housed again and building toward home ownership or at least stability. In speaking to people in tents and RVs five years ago, none of them expected homelessness to define them. Now, I find that the people I speak with are less likely to believe they'll find a permanent place to live and many are giving up on rural and small-town existence, opting for cities with more and higher paying jobs and the potential for housing. And post-pandemic, people are less willing to tolerate long hours for low pay. Rural communities like those in Southern Oregon face worker shortages and a hollowing-out effect.

In seeking out the comparisons between rural and more urban settings in Oregon, it's clear that rental prices are roughly the same in nearly every community but pay in small towns doesn't keep up. And the sheer scarcity of rentals is at a statistical zero. With few jobs and fewer housing options, young people move to cities where they may be able to compete for a better life. Older people may not have that option.

According to the National Low-Income Housing Coalition, on a national scale, only 36 affordable and available rental homes exist for every 100 low-income residents. In 2022, the affordable housing supply cannot meet the demand of low-income renters anywhere in the United States. In places like Oregon, which is mostly rural, that reality hits especially hard. Without enough homes to house the population, a percentage of people will

be unhoused; this is a mathematical fact. As inflation continues driving up prices, that percentage only grows. And the intersectionality around race is another important factor. People of color are also more likely to face housing hardship, instability, and homelessness. 60% or greater of people in low-income households who are paying half their income for rent are people of color. And what's surprising to me is that this isn't surprising to others. There's a nonchalance around the concept that Black and Indigenous People of Color are disproportionately poor even though this group reports higher and higher levels of education.

Without much variation, the unhoused People of Color I interviewed report facing greater levels of discrimination and an increased lack of safety as compared to their white counterparts.

A well-groomed Haitian man in his fifties who found his way to Brookings from the East Coast had hoped to find agricultural work and better weather. We spoke as November rain came down on the roof where he enjoyed a hot meal at Saint Timothy's Episcopal Church which feeds the unhoused several times per week. "I thought maybe out here there'd be work outside and less basic judgment toward me. But I was wrong. I been beat up bad at least three times and I get moved on even worse than the rest--and we all get told to move from wherever we are," he shakes his head in disappointment. "It's hard enough for anyone but I stand out. They want me gone around here and I want to go--but I haven't figured out where. Where am I supposed to be?" I ask him if he experiences discrimination within the homeless community and he shakes his head yes, "It's everywhere, there's no getting away from it."

His health, he says, is holding up but he doesn't know how long that will be true. "Honestly, sometimes I feel like I'm about to lose my mind out here," he tells me laughingly but behind his smile, the truth is clear--he is struggling. He shows me that his pants are held up by a belt that is doubled up, notched to accommodate his increasingly thinner waste. He's bone thin with hungry eyes and he's developed a rash which he believes is from sleeping outside and constantly coming in contact with poison oak. His hands are gashed and he walks with a slight limp from crashing his bike, "I had to ditch. I swear the car was coming at me, straight at me. Do you believe that?"

And here's the reality: the cost of homelessness in terms of healthcare expenses is \$18,500 on the low end and \$44,000 on the high end. This is because of emergency room visits and chronic conditions which worsen. Had these same people been housed, many of the conditions they suffer would never have become chronic.

In a very real and literal sense, it's less expensive to house people than to treat them on the streets. Once a homeless person is housed, healthcare costs decrease by 59%. Emergency room expenses drop by 61% and general inpatient hospitalizations decrease by 77%, according to "Green Doors," a housing-first initiative.

Susan is 70 years old and lives inside her SUV. I'm standing by her car door, speaking to her through the window in Grants Pass, Oregon at Riverside Park. Since the town was successfully sued for their treatment of the unhoused a few years back they've decided to designate this large park by the Rogue River as their campground for the unhoused. You can live in your car or pitch a tent there. Manicured and ample rolling lawns and hills naturally slope toward the river as it winds its way through towns and mountains on its path to the sea. There are old trees for shade in the park and brick-and-mortar bathrooms with flush toilets and sinks for washing and electricity to see in the dark. All in all, short of being housed, it has a sense of safety and community, frayed and unique, but still, like-minded people are surviving their hard lives side by side there.

Susan is homeless after leaving what she describes as an abusive relationship. She gets a small social security check, less than a thousand dollars per month, and she uses that along with her Medicare and “food stamps” to survive. She’s slept in the park for a few months and despite its difficulty, her gear is neatly folded in the back seat and her sleeping area in the far back is hidden behind tinted windows.

“The hardest part is having to get up and pee early in the morning and making coffee in my truck,” she laughs generously about the fact that she awakens at about 7 in the morning and has to run to the bathroom in her pajamas. “No one cares though, we’re all pretty much in the same situation.”

But Susan’s real trouble comes from her various medical conditions. “I get swollen legs pretty bad from sitting in my truck and it’s hard to lay totally flat even in the back. And because of my age, things come up. The latest thing--I couldn’t believe how long it went on.”

I’m bracing myself now for the rest of this story. I’ve heard, seen, and smelled some atrocious things when it comes to the poor health of the unhoused and every time I’m in that situation I have to remember to breathe through my mouth while taking notes because an off smell can distract me from the story. Sometimes the sheer awfulness of even hearing about it can be enough to make me feel briefly sick. But Susan’s face gives nothing away. She’s got an easy smile and her short sandy colored hair is framing her pixy face. Nothing about her at first glance would make you look twice. No smells are coming from her car and no trash is piled inside it. The story she tells me next takes me completely off guard.

“I’m a nurse so I know some things about wound care,” she begins to settle into her story. “When my patients showed up with a blister, I’d clean and dry the wound and then bandage it. But the trick is to keep it clean and dry. It’s hard to do when you’re living outside. Anyway, I got these blisters on my calves from my boots. They’d rub against this one spot on the back of both of my legs and blisters formed.”

She explained to me that she couldn’t see the blisters, only feel them and they didn’t seem that bad. At the time, the boots were her only shoes so she kept wearing them. But little by little the blisters became worse and she got an infection.

“I went to the clinic and showed them the wounds and they washed and bandaged them each time but they didn’t dry them enough and the medicine they gave me didn’t stop the infection. It got so bad that I had maggots in my wounds. I would be walking and they’d drop off of my legs and leave a trail behind me. The smell was overpowering and I got worried if we didn’t stop it, I might lose a leg just because of being so broke I had one pair of poorly fitting boots.

That’s how it starts, usually with something small that gets worse because you can’t get proper treatment or keep it up when you’re out here. I know, believe me.”

Susan explained that she couldn’t take a regular shower and that keeping herself dry wasn’t easy in the winter in Oregon while living at a park. “Every time I’d get out of my car my clothes would get wet and that meant my wounds would be a breeding ground for deeper infection. It was really bad. I was gross and I knew it but I couldn’t get anyone to listen to me that their treatments didn’t work, especially since I couldn’t do the things

they said like taking a shower twice a day, drying the wound, and letting it air out before bandaging and keeping dry. How you going to do that when your car is all you've got?"

The air was still between us. I didn't speak and neither did she for what felt like minutes. Her eyes were wet from describing the experience and mine too from hearing it. Then she dropped her head and shook it in disbelief. "Finally, they put me in a hospital bed for a week or so and got it under control and that took me going every day and refusing to leave," she smiles and gives me a wink before finishing the story. "I will say the maggots helped me. When they saw them dropping all over the floor in the emergency room, they wanted me in a bed."

Susan doesn't have those boots anymore and she's careful with her thinned skin as a 70-year-old. "I'm better now until the next thing happens but I'm pretty well accepting that I'll die out here without a home. I'm on the lists, but they can take a long time. Hell, maybe someone younger should get a house before I do anyway. What have I got to offer?"

The October sun is starting to fall into a pinkish sunset over the river while we exchange some pleasantries about travel and life and love and how she keeps organized. She explains her system of purging so that she never carries more than she's going to need and her fixation with keeping her vehicle clean, "No trash. Ever. If I buy something that comes in a wrapper, that goes to the trash right away. I don't let it build up."

And before I leave, she gives me a list of supplements for the coming winter. "Zinc, Echinacea, vitamin D and C, and, no offense, but you might want to get some vitamin E for your fingernails." She's right, my nails are looking worse for wear.

Riverside Park in Grants Pass is designated as a legal place for the unhoused to exist, so it's often crowded with cars and vans, and trucks all parked next to each other. Some of the vehicles have stopped running, so they stay in space as a shelter. Others come here on their way to somewhere else. Those without vehicles sleep under the shelter of the gazebo if they don't have a tent. For those with tents, they go up just before sunset and come down when the morning wears on. It's not much, they tell me, but finding a place where they don't have to fear being moved or ticketed, means one less thing to fear.

There are injured people at the park mostly. A woman in her fifties works at a convenience store and broke her arm after tumbling down the stairs to her mobile home.

She'd lived there for more than three years but had to move when it sold. She says the owner subdivided her property and sold off the half acre of land and mobile home where she lived. "I knew it was coming, she gave me fair warning. But I looked and looked for something in the price range to move into. Let me tell you on a grocery clerk's salary, it's hard to find anywhere you can afford. The mobile home was only \$850 a month and it tapped me out," she tells me. And breaking her arm while moving didn't help.

She kept thinking she'd find another place and then the accident happened. The break was serious and it meant time off work right when she needed money the most. "I couldn't even move because I had nowhere to go. I kept what I could in storage and had to leave the rest," she says.

Now she sleeps in her van but believes when she goes back to work, she can eventually save up for somewhere to live. "At this point, I'd be thrilled to sleep anywhere inside a home. I'd rent a closet if someone would let me," she tells me with resolve.

Her van, a clean yet older model is parked away from the others and she tends to stay off on her own but remains friendly. "I'm trying to walk a line. I don't want to be antisocial but I also don't want to become a regular here, you know?" She explains that keeping her distance allows her to come and go without any ties and frankly, she whispers, "...there are a lot of drugs out here and I don't need to get involved. I don't touch anything, see anything. I just stay out of it," she tells me with her head bowed so as not to be overheard.

John is watching me as I conduct my interviews. He has a perch on the curb near his tent and is either sitting or popping up to speak with people and ask them what's going on. He floats from cars to tent campers and he's smiling and chatting with nearly everyone who comes through, a sort of concierge for the unhoused and those who visit. He's a tall man with a five-day beard, salt and pepper hair, darting from place to place in running shoes. His wiry frame gives him the look of a runner and his permanent smile indicates a happy man energized by his life. He's a study in contrast among the defeated homeless.

When I finish taking down the story of the woman on the mend from her broken arm, he signals me to come and speak with him and peppers me with questions about what I'm doing in the park. He asks if I have a badge or business card and I explain I have neither but I can show him past work online and he can Google me if he likes. He tells me he doesn't have a badge or card either and I see that he's been teasing me.

We chuckle for a second and he reminds me, "You gotta keep your sense of humor or things can look worse than they are." After some sizing up, we both realize there's nothing much to fear. It turns out he's eager to tell me his role at the park although he hesitates to give many details about himself.

"I make sure everyone has what they need and I encourage the ones who might cause a problem to leave," he tells me. I ask him, "So you offer security?" John elaborates, "I offer security and supplies and sometimes I help people get out of here if that's what they want. And most people do," he says with a shrug. "Personally, I'm okay. But come winter, I won't be."

He explains to me that he finds things, often discarded, and he supplies people. He doesn't charge the unhoused because "We're a kind of family."

John explains that homeless people may not pay rent but they have other bills most of which chew up what little income they have from work, social security, recycling, and sometimes social services. "You probably don't think about it, but do you have any idea how much all the things you buy really cost? If you're surviving on 800 bucks a month, you know the cost of everything, and no little disability check or food stamps will get you by. Everything costs something. You learn that quick when you're out here," John's explaining it to me.

He finds things and brings them back like camp chairs and cushions, clothes and batteries, food discarded in packages, medical supplies, soap—anything he can find and loads up on his bike and brings them back. "I cruise around looking for things people need and give them away." He says he shares according to the needs of the group. He recycles for money but sometimes if he's got enough for the day, he'll drop off extra cans and bottles

for other people who also collect them for money. If anyone is looking for day labor and does not require cash at the moment, he'll refer others. He says it creates a mostly seamless interdependence.

But his underground economy has a dark side too.

He claims for those interested, he will sell their prescription drugs for money and trade. John tells me that it's a reliable way for people to get cash, "These people need things and this is one way they can get it. I make it happen. I take all the risk for them." He tells me in exchange he'll take up to ten percent of the cash. "I don't take anything if they don't have it and I never charge for essentials," he explains however that his largesse is only for the unhoused. "If someone comes through here looking for something, I'm going to charge them top dollar. I got no sympathy when it comes to that."

During our conversation, he pops up every few minutes to speak either to an unhoused person seeking a resource or to a potential customer. He appears to know everyone and his conversations are friendly. "Have yourself a good evening," he says with a wave.

"Anyone can judge what I'm doing, but there are people alive because I'm here," he continues to explain to me between his various customers, some of whom are men seeking prostitutes.

He attends to a person driving through and I hear him, "Sorry man, I don't have anybody working today, come back tomorrow and I can see what I can do," he says with sympathy to a man who appears to be in his late sixties driving an older sedan with a veteran's sticker on the window.

"Do you get a lot of guys like that?" I ask. "Oh yeah, you mean guys looking for dates?" I thought maybe the man was looking for a day worker, but John is setting me straight.

"There's a lot of older veterans living around here who don't know how to talk to women or get in relationships but they're still lonely. Some of these guys just want to buy a woman dinner and hold her hand--seriously--it's not all some tawdry shit," he tells me while lighting a cigarette. "Do you mind? I can move downwind if you want?" I tell him it's fine and ask him to elaborate.

"Some of the women here have been pretty badly abused. I don't let any guys near them unless I'm sure about them. But most of the men are older guys, gentle dudes, who seriously just want the company of a woman. And they've got money. They'll pay hundreds for a weekend," he's smiling. I nod my head and he continues, "You know what I mean? It's not some weird stuff from the movies. A lot of them form relationships and sometimes the women move in with them and just help them with their house and they keep each other company. Like I say, it's not all exploitation and shit. Most of the time it's mutually beneficial," he makes a symbol like a balanced scale as his cigarette hangs from his mouth.

"Yes, but.." I take a deliberately long pause, "You're getting a cut from these women too, right?" He's vigorously shaking his head no. "I take a fee upfront from the guys. If a woman decides to date them, whatever else happens is entirely up to them. It's always a woman's choice. She can say no to sex or whatever and that's it. She can stay with the guy, see him once, take money, not take money--it's 100% up to her. I never take money from the women--it's theirs."

John says he knows what he's doing is illegal but he's not convinced it's wrong. "I shouldn't be needed. If this town cared about these people, they could put me out of business at any time. But they don't and they won't. You don't think they know what goes on? They know," he says as his demeanor turns toward outrage. He puts out his cigarette with force, rubbing it into the pavement as if it's every invisible wound. Then he pulls out a plastic bag from his vest pocket and puts the remains of his cigarette in with the others. "I don't litter," he mumbles.

I can't help but see his point, however distasteful. I'd long wondered how people, even those not paying rent, survived on the money they get. Even with Medicare and food assistance, the cost of poverty is high. You can't prepare food so you have to buy ready to eat and a hundred bucks or even 150 won't cover your food, never mind the cost of trying to stay clean, transportation, cell service, and the million other things most of us buy each month without even noticing. John gives away supplies, medicine, and sometimes money to any of the people in the park who need it even if they never do business with him.

I ask John why he's telling me these things, isn't he worried I'll report him? He tells me I seem trustworthy and then he surprises me. "You're a journalist, right? Don't you have an obligation not to reveal your source?" I nod my head yes and he goes on. "And who are you going to tell? The police? Go right ahead."

He explains that he's been to prison and that's where he learned how to "move products" and "meet needs." John claims his business is an open secret in a sub-set of the culture that he believes most people know but don't care about or they don't see a solution so they look the other way.

"We're doing what we have to. People may not like it but they also probably don't really get it. If you've never had to grind out your existence the way we do, you just can't know. You really can't," he pauses, "Tell you the truth, I appreciate that you're doing this, trying at least to get at what it's really like. Hardly anyone ever does that."

On a personal level, I struggled with reporting this. I worried that it might re-enforce the worst stereotypes of the unhoused or force the city's hand in doing something about it and not one person at the park could withstand a "sweep" where they are forced out to somewhere more remote or a different parking lot without bathrooms and trash pickup. And truthfully, there are people like John everywhere because the needs are real.

I also feared reporting this might trigger medical professionals to withhold pain prescriptions for fear of them being traded for cash, and that wouldn't solve the problem because there's no doubt these people are truly in pain and truly cash-strapped.

One man I met who is part of John's circle is a meth addict. He's in his 60s and used to work in lumber mills. His body is wracked with pain from various hard jobs and accidents that he worked through because he needed the money. He shows me his swollen knees, his hands with misshaped fingers, and a long scar from where he had back surgery at one time.

"My grandfather, father, uncles, brothers--we all worked the mills. I dropped out of school after the ninth grade because I figured I'd always work in the mill. But when they began closing one after the other, I had nowhere to

go for work. I was a broken old man and I was using whatever I could to keep the pain off me so I could keep working. No work, no pay,” he tells me with a sad smile. “I’ve been an addict for twenty years. I think if I stopped, that would probably kill me now,” he says with the conviction of a person who believes it. He bows his head staring down at his hands. “When I’m as sober as I am right now, talking to you, I feel like I must look pretty shabby to you or maybe scary. Please don’t think that, I’d never hurt you or anyone else, but myself, I guess.” I explain that he doesn’t look like any of those things to me. “I grew up in a mill town. I know how it is. I knew a lot of guys in your same position,” I tell him and he seems reassured by that.

The former mill worker who was once the standard kind of blue-collar worker in Grants Pass is now an under-educated self-medicating man who lives in his van and works with John to make a little cash by trading his prescriptions for meth and money. He says if his pain prescriptions worked as well as Meth, he would never have traded them for cash but the prescription would run out each month because it wasn’t enough to solve his pain problem and he overused. His blue eyes are wide and expressive, his face is surrounded by curly grey hair and he smiles showing big gaps where teeth used to be, noting, “My teeth were the first to go.”

The arthritic woman who blurts out in pain during our interview and urges him to tell me to “fuck off” stays in his van with him even though they aren’t friends. “She needed somewhere out of the cold, so she stays in here. I wasn’t brought up to walk past a woman in trouble,” he says. With the money he makes which supplements his 900 dollars in social security each month, Chris says he buys extra food. “I got this old barbecue John scrounged up and I cook for the whole crew. It makes me feel like I’m still someone, you know...” He wipes the side of his face where tears are falling. “You just get tired of being nothin’ to nobody.”

I decided to include this underground barter system because it’s a part of living rough. I cannot speak to its morality, I only know that for some as hard as it is to accept, this too is a complicated part of existence for those living unhoused. In one way it’s a lifeline and in another, it may hasten an end to their hard life, but for those in deep poverty with chronic pain and little hope, this is reality.

I left the park after my interview with John feeling a mix of despair and resignation. Some might say John and Chris are “homeless by choice” and to some degree, it may be true. However, those choices were not made by informed consent. Chris didn’t get paid if he missed a day of work so he kept going when his body needed to heal. And he did that for so long, there was no turning back. He self-medicated first with prescriptions and when that ran out, he used illegal drugs because he had to work and eventually became addicted. There’s no “Old Mill Workers Home” for him to go to and no places affordable for a man who brings in less than a thousand dollars per month. In a way, it’s a choice, and in another, it’s not. John’s story was largely withheld but I pieced together a narrative of rejection by his family and a prison background. He eschews pity seeing himself as a benevolent businessman. I don’t know all the ways he’s homeless but he takes pride in his tidy gear and his ability to honor things and people which others may not notice. “I see the value that others miss,” he tells me. If John made a choice somewhere along the way, he seems unaware of it.

It was in this state of mind, this concern about Chris and John and all the people I spent time with, that I drove through Grants Pass and headed for home. I longed to drop my thoughts onto a page and fire up the stove for a warm home-cooked meal. My husband might ask how my day went but I’d be vague. Days like that cannot be fully discussed over dinner so I’d shift the subject and I’d look forward to letting go of what I witnessed and discussed because sometimes the best thoughts come later.

Instead, I saw a fragile-looking person hitching a ride south to Ashland, based on her cardboard sign, standing precariously close to Interstate Five. An older woman, most likely in her late 60s, sitting on a big suitcase with a trick wheel and a bunch of smaller bags, an oxygen tank, and a giant dog who panted in stress stood there with hope in her gentle, round face. I told myself not to stop even as I pulled off the freeway onto the shoulder.

How could I drive on knowing she was there?

When Mary got in my car it was a bit of a show. It took us time to get her suitcase and all her little bags in my trunk and get her very kind dog settled in the back seat. She huffed and puffed using her cane to navigate her way to the seat without flopping down on her painful hips while she situated her oxygen tank between her knees. She explained that she was visiting her son who's in rehab before trying to decide what's next. Mary had been living in Shasta but lost the last place she was living due to fire. Before that, she stayed with friends and tended the gardens and the people. She didn't get paid but her expenses were covered and everything felt secure until it wasn't. By the time she left, the last living person besides her had passed away. The home went to the owner's children and Mary was back on her own at 65.

"I was stupid. I knew they'd go before I did but I kept thinking something would turn up, that I'd find a place of my own. But the years passed and when Jerry died, I didn't have any rights to the property so that was it, I was gone," she tells me with a long sigh.

"Then I found another old place and I was able to move in there for a while, but sure enough the fire took that out too," she sighs deeply, looking away, then looking at me as if through me. "It's really cool that you stopped. I'd been out there for a while and I was starting to panic. I can barely see in the dark. Why did you stop?" I answered with uncharacteristic brevity, "It's what I do," then pausing, "apparently."

Shasta County has had multiple fires over the last few years, the latest, the Peter Fire, named after Peter Pan Gulch is what pushed her to the streets. She changes her train of thought and optimism returns to her voice, "I heard Ashland is really nice, that you can get people to help you there so I wanted to come and see if I can maybe get some Section Eight or other resources. I can't be out here. I don't know how to do it. It's never come to this before, close, but never this bad."

She's hoping to move permanently. "I'm done with the Shasta area. Too many fires, not enough places to live." Her social security is very small at roughly \$700 per month because she was a low-wage worker and took benefits at 62.

"I'll take you to Ashland, but I can't make any promises," I tell her. "There are no drop-in shelters and I don't think the navigation office is open. But I can get you there."

When we reach the OHRA offices, they are indeed closed. But Mary sees a woman near the door, gets out of the car and knocks.

"Hi, can I just speak to you for a minute?" she says to the woman through the glass door. The woman opens it and urges Mary to come back the next day. I overhear the conversation and urge her to get back in my car

telling her she can return when it opens. I feel a bit embarrassed at my passenger's insistence until I imagine that it's me. What would I do if I was facing a night outside with just my dog and no idea where to go?

I change course in my mind and focus on Mary.

And I'm worried about her, she's becoming pale and breathing shallowly. I vow to find her a hotel room for the night. Mentally tired, it's the last thing I want but I can't just drop her off and leave so we begin the odyssey of finding a place that will take her. I called several motels who said they were full. I find one with an empty parking lot near town and I approach the front desk, "I'd like to book a room for my friend," I tell the front desk clerk who is immediately skeptical.

"But are you staying in the room too?" he's watching me closely.

"I'll be coming and going," I say to him while filling out the form.

"We don't take second-party check-ins," he says while noticing Mary pulling things out of my car with her dog sitting calmly by her side.

"Do you take American Express?" I say still not looking at him and we finish the check-in.

I take the key to Mary and get her settled. She's looking around the room for plugs to get her oxygen going and chatting about getting her dog settled. It's a very basic room but she's finding the good things about it and pointing them out while thanking me. I feel guilty knowing I wasn't as honest as I could have been with the clerk and frankly, I was feeling impatient with Mary. I just wanted to go home. We'd already stopped and bought some food and I'm filling a water dish for the dog. I wish her well, give her my phone number, and drive fewer than six blocks home to release the dog. But not ten minutes through my front door and my phone rings. It's the clerk from the motel.

"Your friend is staying in the room, but you aren't. We explained to you that we don't allow that," his voice is raised and angry.

"You saw me leave the parking lot, then knocked on her door? Why? What's the problem?" I feel defensive of Mary and her dog imagining they must be frightened about being thrown out. "I'm coming now to straighten this out, okay?" I tell him as I'm getting back in the car.

"You need to come here and she needs to leave!" he is in full-blown outrage. I head straight to his office.

"Okay. You caught me. I was renting the room for my friend and I wasn't strictly clear when I said I was coming and going. But I still don't see the problem," I'm trying to be friendlier now for Mary's sake. He finally says what I suspect, "We don't let other people rent rooms because we don't want a homeless in here. We've had bad experiences," he confides.

I let him know that judging one person because of the errors of others is prejudiced. I ask him as a man of color if this ever happens to him and how it makes him feel. "It doesn't make me feel good. I see what you are saying but it's policy and we won't be changing it." He is direct and I can see he's not budging.

I want to say that Mary is a person not “a homeless” and that she just needs a night’s sleep. But I decided it was not worth the effort.

“Please reverse the charges and show me that in a receipt and we’ll leave. Thank you,” I say with no small amount of indignation.

Mary and I pack up her belongings again, her poor dog is bewildered and exhausted but being a good sport, he jumps in the back seat wagging his tail. Finally, I call a friend who knows all the secret society ways of helping the unhoused and she tells me which motel is willing to “take our friends.” I check her in and pray she gets the help she needs.

The next morning I’m awakened by Mary’s bright voice saying OHRA had a room for her because of her oxygen need and that she’s on a waiting list for senior housing. She’s delighted and tearful. “Thank you so much for stopping and for all the things you did for me. I didn’t want to tell you yesterday but I was having such a hard time with breathing, I didn’t know if I’d make it. Then there you were. You looked like an angel when you stopped for me. I think God has special people down here on Earth and you’re one of them,” she’s telling me this with such warmth that it fills me with shame. I know I didn’t want to stop and that the whole experience felt like too much at the time. I was angry with myself for not being a more willing helper but she’s so genuine, I don’t want to hurt her feelings so I thank her and wish her well.

And to me, you shouldn’t need a divine reason to stop for an older woman with a cane, an oxygen tank, and a mountain of luggage standing by the freeway with her dog, nor should housing her require a special force of angelic will. But when so many Americans are one paycheck away from homelessness, resources become stretched and helpers are fewer, maybe it does take something between luck and a miracle to provide a roof, even for a single night.

So profound was the impact of Mary’s situation on me, that I set out to see if I could do something personally to provide low-income housing for people like her. I’d tried once before by creating a nonprofit, “The Skoolie Home Foundation,” to rebuild school buses into sturdy moveable homes for families because so many homeless parents and children wanted one. They hoped for the flexibility of a home that could move with them as they sought out work, sometimes seasonal. I housed two families in two of my fully converted school buses acquired from school districts, but the money ran out and frankly, the housed community thought it was too odd, too worrisome, and too outside the mainstream to support even if our homes were neatly painted and furnished with kitchens, bathrooms and hardwood floors.

So here I was again trying to think of a better way. I found a single-wide, very old mobile home I could purchase for \$14,000. I figured I could put about \$5,000 into it and make it decently livable. The homesite at the RV park costs \$600 per month not including utilities. It added up to roughly \$700 per month. I’d need to charge some small amount of rent to tuck away for repairs and I’d need insurance, so I figured in order not to put myself in a precarious position, I’d charge between 400 and 600 per month to rent the home itself. When you add it up, the low end is still \$1,100 per month. It doesn’t take care of Mary or anyone struggling on minimum wage or low-income social security.

That informed me that individual landlords offering low-income housing are rare because it's near, if not totally, impossible. Even places that used to be affordable like mobile home parks are becoming more and more expensive and increasingly demanding about the age and aesthetics of the homes they'll allow.

There are fewer and fewer places for poor and low-income people to live anywhere. And perhaps the most alarming thing about that is that roughly 60% or more of our rural residents are poor and low-income. The problem is obvious: jobs do not pay enough for childcare, transportation, medical care, and housing. Until that's solved, all the money we spend on programs is money we will not, as a society, recover.

I can only assume that we know this. We understand that workers are underpaid and that despite 94% of Americans agreeing that a person who works full time should not be in poverty, we also have no apparent power to change that or have failed to use the power available. We also know that low wages lead to low social security for retirees resulting in an entire lifetime of poverty which now equates directly to being homeless.

I conclude by quoting Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *Nickel and Dimed: on not getting by in America*: "It is a tragic cycle, condemning us to ever deeper inequality, and in the long run, almost no one benefits but the agents of repression themselves."

In Summary

This report when combined with our work in 2018 gives a clear picture: homelessness when not fully addressed grows and takes a long-term toll on communities and the unhoused themselves. I could have included 50,000 more words with stories such as the ones you just read. And I could include the reality that climate change will be a larger issue as each year passes and more people are displaced by wildfires, floods, hurricanes, and drought.

While interviewing the dozens and dozens of families still displaced more than two years after the Almeda fire which took 2,600 homes in Southern Oregon, it's clear we are not prepared for disasters.

The families still displaced by the fire are living on the blacktop of "Gateway Village" sleeping five to an RV as their children do their homework on a winter's day on outdoor picnic tables and the younger ones ride their bikes aimlessly down the same short streets over and over attempting to organize games alongside the ruins of their former communities.

I met two women tucked away secretly on a sandbar in Curry County, living in RVs that were not plugged into water or sewer. They slept in old recliners through much of the day keeping warm by running a propane stove. The smell of the gas, the precarity of the situation combined with the nauseating odor of spoiling food overwhelmed me. One of the women, a young mother in her forties landed there after having a stroke. She would cry when speaking for fear her trouble in organizing thoughts would make her not worth hearing. Their bad situation got worse, their trailers were washed away in a flood as the winter rains were punishing and the river rose around them. They lost what little they had and barely escaped with their lives.

Their stories highlight a troubling reality that even climate change discriminates. Its impacts on the poor and precariously housed are more punishing with longer-lasting impacts. Even if they have insurance when their homes are destroyed, it doesn't keep up with higher replacement costs and they have fewer options to rebuild even if they own their mobile homes or RVs. But most are renting those units and are left with nothing after a disaster.

Additionally, the stigma persists about homeless people with assumptions about poor mental health and substance use. That's why I thought it was important to mention the underground economy. People suffering from chronic pain need medication *and* housing, they need enough money for food *and* services.

Being homeless impacts every aspect of a person's life, most notably fatigue and a sense of being ostracized. Education projects such as this assist people in understanding more comprehensively what the social cost of homelessness is and the trajectory of what it will be.

Until there is a fundamental shift in indexing the cost of housing to earned incomes to accommodate low-income earners and retirees, there will be a growing need to subsidize housing across all demographic types.

Additionally, zoning, taxation, and vacant home fees to disincentivize investment portfolio groups from becoming a greater influence on the housing market must be considered by policymakers as revealed by numerous conversations within public policy sectors. And while governmental funding can assist in housing,

often those solutions lean toward short-term solutions. Until we move into long-term discussions that account for housing people for years as opposed to months, we will see people cycling through one program after another.

The loss to the community as a result of growing homelessness is profound both from the perspective of people who are not housed long-term and by communities. Schools have children struggling to learn due to homelessness and therefore their education costs more. Seniors who could act as elder advisors are instead discredited and dying in disgrace. And young workers must move out of our Oregon communities to make their money stretch. In every way, we are losing future opportunities.

I yet again a quote from Barbara Ehrenreich:

“Today the answer seems both more modest and more challenging: If we want to reduce poverty, we have to stop doing the things that make people poor and keep them that way. Stop underpaying people for the jobs they do. Stop treating working people as potential criminals and let them have the right to organize for better wages and working conditions. Stop the institutional harassment of those who turn to the government for help or find themselves destitute in the streets. Maybe as so many Americans seem to believe today, we can’t afford the kinds of public programs that would genuinely alleviate poverty—though I would argue otherwise. But at least we should decide, as a bare minimum principle, to stop kicking people when they’re down.”

This was not our first nor only field survey of the unhoused in rural Southern Oregon. We offered a glimpse in 2017 as well. In that survey of roughly 300 persons, we found similarities in the following respects:

- Rural communities have fewer resources to serve the poor and unhoused in terms of medical and mental health as well as substance use disorder providers, nutrition programs, and housing.
- Rural communities face restrictive zoning creating greater difficulty in building affordable housing and many of the existing houses are more and more used for vacation rentals.
- Rural communities face a lack of political will to address the issues of homelessness.
- Income-to-rent ratios are more challenging in rural communities as pay is lower, between \$14 and \$18 per hour in jobs that cap at 30 hours per week. Yet, rents are as high or in the case of coastal communities, higher than urban areas.

The differences in our survey from 2017 to the present day appear to be around demographics, attitudinal perspectives, and space for the unhoused to dwell.

We found fewer unhoused children with families willing to identify as unhoused

The number of working while unhoused persons increased

Communities were less willing to tolerate the visible unhoused setting up camps near services, forcing the unhoused to push further out creating difficulty in accessing help

Gratitude

I express gratitude to the hundreds of people who contributed to my understanding of homelessness and allowed me to capture their stories for this report.

Thanks also go out to the staff and volunteers who are daily working to assist the unhoused in their struggle to survive.

My appreciation is also present to policymakers who continue to educate themselves on how to solve homelessness and who believe that, indeed, it can be solved.

Finally, I thank AllCare Health for its relentless belief in caring for people and for enabling me to compile this report.

What follows is the report we conducted in 2017 & 2018 for your reference. It contains the stories of the unhoused to whom we spoke.

Jackson County, Oregon is the largest of the three counties where we interviewed hundreds of people living either outside, in cars, doubled up, or in sub-standard sheds and abandoned buildings.

With a population of roughly 200,000 people, the area tends to have more services and income as compared to more rural areas. Still, nearly 25% are eligible and receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance. The median income for the county is \$43,000 annually per household, as compared with Oregon overall which is \$57,532. Rents have steadily increased since 2010 beginning at a median of \$1,000 to \$1,400 in 2018. Certain areas are higher and some are lower but all are within that range statistically. Roughly 18% live below the poverty line, according to the US Census Bureau.

It comes down to a severe lack of housing, vacancy rates hover at around 2%. The lack of supply has caused rents to steadily increase. Yet incomes remain flat.

While building permits for new single-family homes have continued to increase from 300 issued in 2010 to 600 in 2016, permits for multi-residential units of 5 or more have remained largely unchanged in the 100 permits-per-year range since the housing recession hit in 2008, driving down construction rates. With the decline in construction following the recession and housing crash, many builders and contractors either left the profession, left the area, or both. The demand for housing is increasing but the labor has not returned, further exacerbating the housing shortage and slowing new construction.

This lack of units in volume and at affordable rates based on the median income has created a vacuum of workforce housing. Poverty hotspots include the White City area, Phoenix, and rural areas such as Rogue River, according to the Census Bureau.

Services, however, are concentrated in the county seat of Medford. Transportation appears largely accessible in the metropolitan area for those needing to get to services. However, bus services do not run late at night for second shift workers or early in the morning, and most routes offer limited to no services on weekends for workers. Still, Rogue Valley Transit District continues to seek funding to improve its service which many low-income people report as

adequate.

The average hourly wage in Jackson County among renters is \$12.54 per hour, according to Oregon Housing and Community Services. The amount needed to afford a two-bedroom apartment would be \$16.58. A person would have to work 65 hours per week at minimum wage to afford an apartment at Fair Market Rent as calculated by Housing and Urban Development (HUD). In 2018, that rate is roughly \$900 per month. The HUD number is, however, not calculated to current housing costs. Rents in Jackson County have not been in the \$800 to \$900 per month range since before 2010, yet this is the rate of subsidy for a HUD home.

Factor in that wages are not indexed to the true cost of housing and a lack of housing supply which keeps rents out of reach for many, and you start to see the hard realities that can result in homelessness.

One-third of renters in Jackson County spend more than half of their income on rent. In lower-earning populations, such as those making minimum wage or working part time that number is four out of five. Unemployment is additionally higher in Jackson County at 5.8% as compared to Oregon at 4.9%. But, as we know that only counts those actively collecting compensation and does not include those for whom benefits are exhausted or who are underemployed or collecting Social Security.

According to the Point in Time (PIT) Count, a HUD-mandated outreach event that attempts to record the number of people homeless on one day in January, the number of homeless people in Jackson County is 633.

However, as most social service agency representatives acknowledge, the PIT count is not an accurate representation of homelessness in a community. The PIT is limited by funding, a mostly volunteer workforce with varied levels of participation and experience, it is done on one day under cold conditions, and most counts are during the day when unsheltered people tend to be moving about or seeking shelter. It does not have an effective way of counting those who may be sheltering in vehicles or substandard, abandoned, or shared housing which does not comply with rental rules. Nor, does it calculate those staying in motels or hotels for periods of time. As George Jarvis of Access, a community service provider who conducts the count for the Census said, it's difficult to find people.

Plus there's an added problem, according to Jarvis, "Not everyone wants to be part of the count. They fear having their identities connected to being homeless and that's if you can find them. We're experimenting with ways to provide incentives such as warm food and supplies for participating."

Much of what we are dealing with in Jackson County, as witnessed in attending governmental meetings with governmental agencies, non-profit organizations, and church groups working on the “issue of homelessness” is that there is a prevalent attitude of assessing whether someone is worthy of receiving services. There is an expressed opinion that only certain homeless people deserve food, housing, and medical care. Part of the reason for this is a belief that homeless people cause their plight or are unable or unwilling to contribute to society or that they wish to be homeless. It is unclear how this perspective impacts services individually however it’s clear that municipalities in the region have created ordinances criminalizing behaviors specific to the homeless through “camping” bans, exclusionary zones, automatic trespass orders, and non-smoking in public, outdoor spaces.

The prevailing opinion as stated in public meetings is that homeless people may present a public safety threat due to the perception of causation. It is believed that many people become homeless due to:

Addiction: This amounts to roughly 24%, a much lower number than frequently believed or quoted. The National Center for Biotechnology Information reports that substances are more frequently used by homeless individuals dealing with a disability than those not disabled. It says these individuals use substances as a method of pain management. The report also states that 24% may also be too large of a number given the fact that many homeless populations are suffering only from economic issues. In its study, “Homelessness, Health, and Human Needs,” NCBI further states the recent trends around greater numbers of women with children and single women suffering homelessness have impacted the concept of the addicted homeless person, making it less than previously thought.

The NCBI study states: “More recent studies, however, suggest that this perception may be stereotypical rather than real.”

Mental Illness: It’s estimated that between 25 to 50% of homeless individuals may suffer some form of mental illness, a large percentage of which would not be major illness and due in part to being homeless. Disorders resulting from homelessness such as anxiety and phobic disorders occur as a result of being unsheltered.

Refusing to Work: The Urban Institute reports more than half of homeless adults worked in the last 30 days. That’s if you only count traditional jobs. If you factor in “off the books” work and collecting scrap metal and recyclable materials then the number would be much greater. Add to that that one third of the homeless population is of retirement age and subsisting on social security not indexed to the cost of living. Children who are not able to work also comprise a growing percentage of the homeless.

According to the NCBI report: “Becoming homeless is a psychologically traumatic event that commonly is accompanied by symptoms of anxiety and depression, sleeplessness, and loss of appetite.”

When these illnesses are factored out the number of those suffering true mental illness unrelated to their condition of homelessness, the number gets down to roughly 12%.

An article in the Philadelphia Tribune cites statistics that describe the situation nationally and help frame the issue in Southwest Oregon:

“Estimates show that nearly 1.4 million children are homeless in this country every year. In the 2011-2012 school year, 1,166,339 homeless children and youth were enrolled in public schools. This is a 71% increase since the 2006-2007 school year. The number of homeless children increased in 31 states between 2012 and 2013, with leaps of 10 percent or more in 13 states and Washington, D.C.

In Oregon in 2018, there are 21,340 students estimated to be homeless according to the state’s Homeless Student report. This represents steady growth for the fourth year in a row.

It is important to note that this number is not an estimate of the prevalence of child and youth homelessness; in fact, it is an underestimate, because not all school districts reported data to the US Department of Education, and because the data collected represents only those children identified and enrolled in school. Finally, the number does not include all preschool-age children, or any infants and toddlers.

Based on the data and empirical evidence from the field it would appear the national conclusions overlay with realities in Jackson County. A little more than half the openly, unsheltered homeless are seniors. Young people between 24 and 35 make up the next visible demographic of homeless at roughly a third and the rest are children, young families partially sheltered in vehicles or RV’s and younger college students. The presence of a homeless person in their 40’s is rarer. For those not children or seniors most are employed part time, full time or actively seeking work.

The report which follows chronicles the lives of unhoused people at a particular place and time in which they were unhoused, it is not the sum total of their life experience. Many moved out of homelessness to better circumstances due to their determination and resilience, some moved away from the area in hopes of finding success and sadly we know of at least one who passed away.

Every person we met generously shared their stories as a contribution to our research for which we are grateful.

Who are the homeless of Jackson County, Oregon?

Michelle Viera, 54, homeless for one year

Michelle came from Las Vegas to help her older sister after the woman's kidney transplant "She's on a lot of medicine. I wanted to help her." Michelle had been working in customer service at a retailer and was certain she could find that kind of work in Medford after her sister got back on her feet.

But none of that happened. "It seemed to make sense I'd help her, she'd help me and once we both were on our feet, we'd see where we were."

Then the whole plan changed. Her sister became increasingly agitated with Michelle. They weren't used to living together. The medications she was on affected her moods. Michelle was asked to leave. She ended up sleeping in her car and looking for work when the combination of stress and lifelong high blood pressure combined. "I had a massive stroke I couldn't do anything." That was in August. "I was in rehabilitation trying to figure out how to care for myself again. I got to a certain point and that was it I got kicked to the curb." Michelle applied with Rogue Retreat and found temporary housing at Hope Village, a tiny house community off Columbus Street in West Medford. "The place got me on my feet."

Now she hopes for a more modest life than she had planned. "I think I could make it once I get my disability." She has praise for the tiny house village "I think Rogue Retreat is a good program. If it weren't for this, I'd be in the park. Since being here I've been able to get to my doctor's appointments I feel hopeful." The tiny house community is nestled behind a wide gate with several duplex-style small houses. They are basic shelters with a mattress and a Tupperware bin for personal belongings. There is no heat nor electricity but they keep guests out of the elements and safe. "They aren't meant to be long-term homes. They're temporary places for people to get back on their feet and find their way forward," says Program Coordinator, Heather Hassett. She shows me the trailer where guests can prepare food and the main house where there are couches and a television.

Michelle says for her the key was expecting it to get better no matter how bad it got. She says there needs to be more programs to bring people inside because it can be impossible without a safe place to be, especially, if, like her, you have a disability. "I really advise people to try hard to get into a program and stay positive. Go all good in your thinking."

Michelle's time at Hope Village is coming to an end. She applied for space at a care facility since she still can't work due to lack of mobility. She can't walk and struggles to move from her chair to her walker. "I couldn't go back to work. I tried but I couldn't I was in shock to be where I am."

Conclusions:

With the aging of the homeless population programs involving services for physical and mental disability become more important.

While transitional housing helped Michelle, had she not qualified for a care home she would have been

back outside after her year at Hope Village, as she has no income. The Village puts a time limit on how long guests can stay. They are hoping to get people into other forms of housing or through a process of disability or work by the time the year is up. The goal is to move people through, not to provide long-term housing.

However, due to the length of time until recipients qualify for disability after applications are made thousands find themselves in a gap in care.

Christine Hardy, 67, homeless two years

Christine Hardy is tall and lanky at the age of 67. She parses her words carefully as she sits on a sunny day on a couch in the community room of a transitional housing shelter.

She and her husband, who is 60, live off of his disability and her social security checks. Combined it amounts to \$1,400 per month. They left Riverside, California where they had both worked when her husband became disabled. “We stayed with friends and family for a while, but that can’t last.”

Her husband walks with a cane, has chronic pain from back injuries and both knees need replacement. They’ve been shifting from campsites to homeless shelters for two years now.

“I have moved so much I want some place I can call my own Being able to stay there and say, I’m home.”

Christine and her husband have to separate in the winter because shelters don’t have family housing that she qualifies for, “I can’t take the cold so I go inside. He stays in his truck. I can’t believe I’m in this situation. Some of them nights are awful cold,” she says now tearing up. “I’ve worked most of my adult life and raised my kids. Coming up here it’s been handouts and food. You need that little bit of help and it’s hard to ask for it. Most of them, who help, think you’re spending it on drugs and alcohol. It was gas and groceries. Up there in the campsite, there was no place to cook. We finally got a camp stove and someone came and took it.”

Christine struggles to understand why more people don’t see the growing number of homeless people. “They have more housing for vets so you see it can be done. There are so many abandoned buildings and homes. There needs to be more shelters. There are families living out here. I don’t understand.”

Christine says while she’s grateful for the times she’s had a roof over her head she whispers that there are hardships in being separated from her husband and the fact that there is no bathroom in her room. She has to go outside and find her way to the bathroom. “That’s hard in the night and the cold.”

She struggles with losing her faith in people, she says her husband has already lost faith. As a result they try to stay far away from other people. They fear having the few things that they still have stolen. They fear the judgments too, “Most folks think you’re just a drunk or a druggie. It gets pretty depressing.”

Christine also says she enjoys it when people offer meals at local parks and they can stretch their budget

without having to buy as much. She also hopes her husband will one day qualify for surgery so he's not in pain and can walk more easily. "It's a wait-and-see if he'll get it."

Meantime, she is obsessed with pinching pennies. Their big dream is a fifth wheel they can tow with their truck. Then, Christine says, she'll have a place to be—a home.

Conclusions:

Low-income seniors on a fixed income struggle with social security not being adequate after retirement. Those on disability face similar obstacles.

Jackson County lacks adequate shelter. There are few year-round shelters and those which exist are not designed for families.

There is a serious need for low-barrier or barrier-free housing: programs designed specifically for groups such as veterans and those addicted to substances, while helpful to those who fit the criteria cannot serve those who are in need but don't meet specific eligibility restrictions.

Dale Townsend, 54, homeless for six months

Dale Townsend, likes living in Ashland and hopes he can stay, but it may not be possible "If I don't get paid soon, I won't be able to be here. I like helping but right now it's costing me."

Originally from the Bay Area, he came for a restart and a way to contribute. Townsend says he had a dramatic reaction to the hepatitis B vaccine and it changed everything. "I was barely able to move for months. The dosage was too much for me." Once he got sick, he lost his job and then his home.

Townsend had been living in subsidized housing but he said it was a difficult place to stay, "The crime started getting bad. The issue of poverty and no jobs is getting huge everywhere. After I got sick I couldn't afford to stay there anyway."

Townsend is sleeping behind a restaurant with trash bins. He has permission to be in the locked enclosure because he keeps the area clean. He hopes he can either get a skilled trade job or be supported in starting his own business. He says he hasn't found many job opportunities but he noticed a problem that he wanted to tackle, "There's trash everywhere, it needs to be taken care of throughout the day."

Townsend walks the downtown area with a dustpan and broom in all weather conditions, seven days per week cleaning up. "One reason I do it is that nobody else does. It also gives me time to think and what I do is helpful. I asked the mayor if I could get paid for it, he said I should but I haven't yet."

You'll often see Townsend making the loop down Lithia Way and up Main Street in Ashland with his industrial dustpan.

"I'm staying in the mode of working, so I stay active."

Homeless since October, Townsend has dreams of creating a cleaning business with two other friends who sleep outside. He hopes in doing the clean up around businesses, staying pleasant, and showing his work ethic, that he may find support for his idea, "We clean up everything as it appears and make sure the environment by businesses and throughout town is straightened up."

Townsend does it because he needs a job and income, "People think we're homeless because we're lazy or we don't care. It's not true. I want to work. Most of these guys out here want a job and a productive way to spend their time. We also want a place to sleep where we won't be bothered. But more than anything we want jobs that pay enough to have a place to live."

Townsend says it's nearly impossible to be a working person while homeless. "There should be day shelters where people can be, there should be showers and individual and proper assessments to really help people move up. What we have now, while it's good to offer some assistance, keeps people on the street."

He says people need "on-ramps" to help them back into society once they've had a circumstance that causes them to be homeless, and he says, "shut out from opportunity. "

"I know each of these individuals out here personally. You watch them deteriorate. I'd rather work I want to have money. I think we need to stop relying on the government, they don't come through."

Townsend says he can drive buses or do delivery jobs but so far, he hasn't had any luck getting work. He believes it's because he sleeps outside. But he's tried to find housing. "These housing lists aren't for everyone, you sign up but you don't get help. " Townsend is referring to the waiting lists for subsidized housing. It can take up to three years before you are placed in low-income housing. Vacancy rates for any housing hovers between one and two percent in Ashland and the Rogue Valley. There are roughly 26 units for every 100 people who need a place to live according to the Oregon Housing and Community Services.

Townsend also says it's hard to get housing if you're not in a specific program because you don't qualify "You're often disqualified if you're not in the program but there aren't enough programs for people to get real help."

Meantime, he's not giving up. He says if he keeps doing the work eventually it will bear fruit and he can feel like a participating member of the Ashland community. He struggles with asking for help. He hates to hold a sign. "Some people don't know what it's like to have to ask for something," Townsend says while looking down at his dustpan, "I'd like to get the community to sponsor people. Businesses could help us create a team."

He's approached the owner of several restaurants in town and says he's been told he can continue to clean but he's not been paid, "I could even make 25 bucks a day I could at least camp legally if there's space."

Conclusions:

44% or nearly half of all homeless people worked in the last 30 days. While the official unemployment number remains low at 3.9%, it does not reflect people who are not on benefits, who do not qualify, or who are on social security. Wages have not increased in three decades yet rents have continued to rise by as much as 50% in many west coast communities of which Jackson County is one. Dale's story is indicative of the difficulty in getting back into the workforce after facing injury or illness, especially after turning 50. Nearly half of all homeless people are seniors. Some 380,000 children under 18 are reported as homeless and roughly 50% of homeless people are older than 50 according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

Reatha Kershner, 70, homeless four years

Reatha's grief put her on the streets "When Richard died, I didn't care anymore. We flipped houses together. That's funny. We had more than one house and now I'm out here. I'm staying wherever I can except outside. It's too cold."

Kershner said when her husband died she couldn't stay in the house they shared. "I had to get out of there. I tried but I couldn't stand to be there when he wasn't." Kershner says she signed her home over to her realtor and walked away. "I told her to take it. Sell it and give the money to poor children, I didn't care about it or anything."

The petite woman with neatly trimmed hair, a lace pink sweater, and a pearl bracelet looks lively as she nurses her coffee at a community meal. Her homelessness began four years ago when she walked away from her old way of living. She's been walking ever since. "I go everywhere on foot. I don't have bus money and I wouldn't use it if I did. I figure I have to do my job; that's staying moving and figuring it out." Sometimes she stays in studios and garages after seeking permission, "I hike around until I find a spot and I ask. It works out sometimes and other times it doesn't. But I've got to live, don't I?"

Reatha smiles as she tells the story of hiking into the mountains toward a remote location several miles down the path and through a field where she found a home and an artist's studio, "I knocked on the door and it was getting dark. I asked if I could spend the night in the studio. It was unlocked, I probably could have snuck in there but I don't do that. They told me it was fine and I stayed there for a long time, weeks. It was great. You can sometimes find things like that but you can't overstay."

She acknowledges that her story is unusual, "I probably shouldn't be out here but I wasn't thinking clearly. Now that I am here, I just have to keep making it work. I'm not the only one who got caught up in my head who's homeless. Honestly, I feel more sorry for the animals than people. I should have done something differently. Some people can't help it, and some can, but once you're in the situation, it's almost impossible to get out I know that now."

Kershner is wearing a hospital bracelet. She was discharged to an overnight emergency shelter after being admitted to the hospital with pneumonia. She is still coughing "It's not my first time I go in there [the hospital] with it all the time. They give me some medicine and then bounce me back out here. This

time I was in there for a day.”

In looking around the meal, a gathering of roughly 40 people, most of whom are homeless, served buffet style in a community room of Pioneer Hall in Ashland where they eat at folding tables on paper plates. I am counting hospital bracelets. Among those sitting and milling at this one meal on a given Friday I’ve seen half a dozen people just released from a hospital. Hospitals give homeless people recently discharged rides to shelters. It’s a claim hospitals don’t deny saying that they can’t keep a person in the hospital when they’re ready for discharge but they also cannot leave people to fend entirely for themselves on the street. There is little transitional housing for released patients according to Kershner who acknowledges the issue this way; “They give you medicine, patch you up, and send you back out. It’s not a hotel. But sometimes if I can’t find a place to sleep inside, I could get worse, especially with the pneumonia. But most of the time I find somewhere to be inside.”

Conclusions:

Due to the increasing age of the homeless population, low-income senior housing is stretched to its limit.

Nearly half of those receiving Section 8 HUD housing vouchers in Oregon are seniors or people with disabilities, 75% are considered extremely low-income, with the average household income in 2015 at \$11,500.

Additionally, many low-income apartments are on the cusp of timing out, meaning that the original loan program that created the housing as “affordable” has expired or been paid off, which will allow them to rent at market rates. There are 325 HUD properties in Oregon Of these, 4,000 rental units have Section 8 rental assistance which began expiring in 2016 and will until 2024.

Owners are choosing to not renew and rent at the market value, which continues to increase, or they are renewing in shorter, fixed terms. When mortgages mature, or expire, there is no law requiring owners to keep the units affordable.

Unless communities invest in and create more affordable housing, the existing stock will expire without being replaced. This potentially spells trouble for current and future low-income individuals and families.

According to a 2016 state audit of Oregon Housing and Community Services:

“Determining the number of HUD properties at risk for conversion to the private market is challenging given available data, as each property would need to be examined individually to determine its risk factors. Though not at risk of losing subsidies, there are an additional 72 HUD-administered properties with 2,204 rental units, at risk of deterioration due to age and inability to take on debt to recapitalize and renovate.” This leaves the shrinking number of affordable housing units subject to becoming slum housing.

Sean Hart Wick, 47, homeless one year

Sean wants to finish his degree. He is studying applied sciences at Rogue Community College but had to drop out. He couldn't afford the 800 dollars it would take to pay for his classes and supplies, "I'm going back. I'm not giving up I got a job at Cascade Wood Products but there's nowhere to stay near the plant and buses don't run after the second shift. I just need enough money to have a room to sleep in near work so I can get back and forth and save up that money for school."

Right now Wick sleeps under a bridge most of the year to be closer to work. But in winter Ashland has one of the few emergency shelters with space so he commutes south to be inside. But even that does not always pay off, "They do a good job and try to get everyone in but sometimes they run out of space which is hard especially if it took two buses to get here."

Wick is like thousands of college students dealing with annual tuition and fee hikes, "It's a constant battle to stay afloat. You can't get a decent-paying job without an education anymore. But you can't get an education because the price keeps going up. If I didn't think this would pay off at some point, if I didn't think that I could graduate and make enough to get off the streets, there'd be no way to keep going. Even so, there are no guarantees I just have to keep trying."

And Wick is trying to preserve what he can of his credit to qualify for housing when he's able to save enough money. If he gets a citation for sleeping outside that goes on his credit report, "They turn you over to collections if you don't have money to pay. It's over a hundred dollars. So even when you're trying to save, if you get a ticket that can send you back to the beginning. "

So he stays in emergency shelters and campgrounds when he can. "Even the campgrounds are expensive. It's 20 or 25 dollars a day. They should be 10 dollars a night or maybe they could help people with the extra so they could have a shower and a place to leave a pack. It's impossible to get to there—a job and stability—from here."

Wick never expected to be homeless. He grew up middle class in Southern California but found it harder and harder to get work and pay his bills on the minimum wage jobs he could get. He describes being homeless as a frightening experience. "It's cold and dark It feels scary. I had a girlfriend but she couldn't take it anymore. She left me to find a place to live."

He sees education as his only hope of breaking his personal poverty cycle but even then, he wonders if it'll be enough. The stress, he says, nearly killed him, "I was in ICU for five days with a hole in my stomach. The stress, lack of sleep and food can actually kill you." He says the hospital released him and he had nowhere to go and no way to get to Ashland for a place to sleep, "I could not afford a bus. I started walking but it was hard. I wasn't recovered."

He shrugs, "You can't expect much help and you don't know if you can do it on your own. That's basically it."

Conclusion:

According to the Institute for Higher Education's 2017 report, 95% of all-American colleges are too expensive for low income students.

As the state leaves funding flat for higher education and schools are forced to shell out roughly 10% of their annual budgets on retirement, students feel the pinch. Oregon ranks 37th nationwide in terms of financial support for its public colleges and universities. Meantime federal Pell Grants instituted in the 70s to assist low-income students went from paying 75% to a little over 30% of student's costs. With the rising costs of rents, students like Hart find themselves having to take on more work, take fewer classes and still unable to find housing while working and going to school.

Many jobs that pay more than minimum wage require a college degree or certificate. Over the last several decades, however, there has been a significant shift in financial policy for higher education: on the one hand, the cost of attaining a degree has skyrocketed and, on the other, state and federal funding for college costs has been rolled back significantly. Combined it means even the scant hope of pulling oneself out of poverty through education is becoming less plausible for tens of thousands of Oregonians.

Factor in the increasing costs of rent and you find students in school longer, paying more out of pocket expenses and struggling to find a place to live and food to eat. Now that rules have changed making it impossible for full time students to receive supplemental nutrition assistance, food is also a cost factor for those attending college. Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014, students must work at least 20 hours per week to qualify for SNAP (food stamps), which is a challenge for a full-time student. Few qualify as a result. Wick, like others, may go days without a meal.

Johnny Miller, 55, homeless for three years

"The deeper down you go the harder it is to get out. There's a lot of different scenarios and no one answer," says Johnny, a former union mason who lost his career when he stepped through scaffolding and landed on his shoulder. He was injured beyond surgery's abilities to restore him to his former ability, "I can't lay 800 blocks a day anymore."

He hung on through worker's compensation and continued to pay child support but eventually, worker's comp ended and so did his steady income. He started doing odd jobs. He worked as a fire camp caterer and took any work he could get, "My job was my identity. It's not what I did but what I was It was hard to regroup from that."

Homeless for three years, Johnny had a bed at the Kelly Shelter in Medford during the cold months. He slept there at night and got a job working as a janitor at a cannabis oil maker. It pays 13 dollars per hour. "It's not what I pictured in my life at this point but it's a job and a start. You have to keep faith."

He hopes that if he shows his good character he can work his way up through the company. "They are going to be expanding. I'm hoping if I can prove to them that I'm an asset I can get my foot back in the

door. It's a blow to my pride to start back at the bottom but I'm at least somewhere."

Throughout his life Miller prided himself on his physical strength and ability to keep working. "I didn't understand anything about how a person could end up here, homeless. I believed they just didn't want to work. That's before I got hurt. Now I know how fast it can happen, how you can lose everything."

Miller says the first year after his injury he kept working on his property. He was clearing away downed trees and trying to build a road into his vacant and wooded lot in Alaska. "I got it because it was cheap, I figured I'd use it as a camping place in the summer. But after I got hurt and lost everything else, I lived on it in my truck for a while." Miller said he did the work with one arm to clear his lot. His injured right arm could barely move. His neighbor noticed, giving him odd jobs to help him financially but it wasn't enough. Miller eventually lost that property too and for the first time in his life had literally nowhere to be. That's how he decided to cater for wild land fire crews because he could work and have a place to sleep. But it was temporary.

"My identity is different now. Desperation changes who you are. I don't think I'll ever scrape this experience off of me."

Johnny aspires to become a union contractor and regain his confidence, "The more choices you have, the more dignity. I'm starting from scratch."

Conclusion:

Injury and illness are the cause of homelessness for most who find themselves with nowhere to call home. NerdWallet, a financial tracking website, estimates that 57.1% of US personal bankruptcies are due to medical bills, making it the leading cause of the financial calamity that often precedes homelessness.

Johnny's story is one told often: the connection between loss of housing and poor health or injury is frequent. MD, Seiji Hayashi puts it this way in her article for The Nation, "The sick and vulnerable become homeless, and the homeless become sicker and more vulnerable."

Although the tipping point which causes the fall into homelessness is often the loss of a job, sickness or injury precedes it. Due to the mostly employer-based health insurance coverage system in the US, no job often means no health insurance, unless you qualify for Medicaid or Medicare. The combination of unemployment and poor health can then lead to financial ruin and does regularly. About 3.5 million Americans experience homelessness at some point during the year. More than 11 million people that we know of are spending more than half their income on rent.

Audrey Graham, 36, Homeless five years

Audrey's cycle of homelessness and abuse began in 2013 when she lost her apartment because she couldn't afford to keep the lights on. "They won't let you stay there like that. But even though I worked

as a landscaper as many hours as I could get, I couldn't afford to pay all my bills."

Graham was one of the thousands who paid more than 50% of their income on rent. Choices are made monthly on whether to pay rent, utilities, or food. She could get food, and pay rent and gas for her vehicle but not the power bill. Once it was shut off she needed a deposit to get it turned back on and she could never get enough money to do it.

She moved into her car and that kept her off the streets for a while until her car broke down and she couldn't move it, "When I was sleeping in my car, I was okay, I could stay warm and I could lock my stuff up. It wasn't ideal but I learned how to do it. But when I lost my car, that was it. I was at the bottom. I couldn't get work, my ID got taken and I wasn't really a person anymore, not like I was, not like other people are."

Her vehicle got ticketed and then impounded with what was left of her possessions in it. She couldn't afford to get it out. She couldn't afford to replace any of her things. She carries a backpack and a shopping bag.

Not having a safe place to lock herself in at night made her vulnerable to attack. The Family and Youth Services Bureau reports, "Homeless women are far more likely to experience violence of all sorts than American women in general, by differentials ranging from two to four depending on the specific type of violence in question."

"I've been beat up on the street so many times I have permanent bone and muscle damage. I can't do the heavy work I used to do. And I'm pretty depressed. It's hard for me to figure out how to pick myself up."

Add to that the theft of her ID and she says the last thing she had, a decent credit rating, is also gone, "I've lost or had my ID stolen six times in 18 months. My Social Security number has been used by at least three others."

Audrey describes her life now this way, "It's a hole, you can't do anything to get out of."

She plans to try to make her way to New Mexico and find cousins with whom she's lost touch, "I need to live in a warmer climate. I'd have housing and a place to garden." She is hopeful but unsure. It's not been guaranteed but she feels if she can reconnect, she can make something happen. The rest of her relatives are no longer living or in contact with her. The person Audrey says she most related to was her grandmother whom she lived with into adulthood, "When she died and I lost that place to live and to be with her, I feel like I lost my roots."

Graham says she can't make it entirely on her own based on her current condition and she hasn't found a program that fits her specific needs for any length of time to keep her stable. "You have to keep moving around from place to place and program to program I don't fit any specific category but homeless."

If she can't find family in New Mexico Graham says she'll try again to find a program that fits her. "I'll

keep trying, I think If I can get rest and heal maybe I can get back into a job and take care of myself. It's not just the physical pain, though, it's the depression. Sometimes I don't know if I can get through that. I went to the hospital and told them that but they sent me on my way. They don't have a program I can find for that depression. I guess I don't know what will happen. But right now I feel like I'll keep trying."

Conclusions:

According to the National Institutes for Health in a study published in 2002, the majority of homeless people surveyed reported depression to the point of considering suicide. What's difficult in evaluating the data is that results vary over time and are based on shifts in the homeless population. Following the housing crash in 2008, more people had been living in stable environments suddenly finding themselves on the homeless spectrum; homeless, couch-surfing, facing eviction, or otherwise in unstable living situations. Now more people with education are sliding from stable housing into homelessness. From this study, it's not possible to see if the "new homeless" or what some call "economic refugees" suffer suicidal ideation more or less than their counterparts.

However, the 2002 study closely links suicidal thoughts and attempts to homelessness.

A sample of 330 homeless adults were interviewed for the NIH study. Sixty-one percent of the study sample reported suicidal ideation and 34% had attempted suicide. Fifty-six percent of the men and 78% of the women reported prior suicidal ideation, while 28% of the men and 57% of the women had attempted suicide. Childhood homelessness of at least 1 week without family members and periods of homelessness longer than 6 months were found to be associated with suicidal ideation. Psychiatric diagnoses were also associated with suicidal thoughts in this sample.

In our survey, when asked about episodes of depression or chronic depression, the majority of those asked reported periods of depression ranging from weeks to months and some responded, "years". As to thoughts of suicide, roughly one-third admitted to experimenting with attempts and more than 70% reported considering suicide at one time as an "option" in dealing with homelessness.

Mark, 27, homeless six months

Mark does not want to give his last name He is sitting on a sidewalk with a small plate of donated food "I think the hardest thing is trying to be in society holding a sign.

"I fly signs for jobs. I believe people like me don't want handouts, we want jobs. Sitting out here getting a free meal or begging for a shower makes me feel like shit, like nothing."

Mark is actively suffering depression. He tells me in a quiet voice as he's leaning on a rock, his long fingers appear to be working out the problem as he talks expressing his attempts at taking his life, "I've tried to kill myself 27 times. I've hung myself, shot myself. Something is holding me in this hell hole. I can't even have a relationship."

He says it's the isolation of homelessness that most gets him down, "I feel like the look every single person gives me is, 'How dare you exist? You need to fucking die because you're worthless.' I've had that said to me a lot of times. The kindest people I've ever met were homeless or living in second or third-world countries." Mark says it's the housed who pass him by and make him feel judged. "I'm tired of being treated like the dirt they walk on. I've had 44-ounce sodas thrown at me by people driving by."

Mark had a job working at a call center. He was living with friends and paying his share of the rent. The call center let him go. "They thought I was using drugs. They asked me and I said I had done mushrooms in the past while working there but wasn't now. They still fired me. The funny thing is they didn't like my personality sober as much as they did when I used mushrooms. I haven't done them in a long time. But I lost everything." Living in Roseburg he found few opportunities for more work. When he couldn't pay rent, his friends evicted him. "So I came down here. I thought maybe I could get a job mining. I have a friend in Japan who will buy gems from me if I can harvest them. But that doesn't seem realistic now. I don't have equipment or any way to get out there to mine." He says he'd be happy to have any kind of work to get him off the street.

"There are so many services to help the homeless stay homeless. Give us a job and a place to stay. 60 to 70% of us will keep it."

Mark says this idea that the homeless are the problem seems backward to him, "I think this country as a government views the homeless as a problem. I don't think we're a problem." Mark believes if given a chance he could be an asset. He'd like a job working on a farm, any kind of outdoor work or labor, he says, would suit him.

Conclusion:

From 1996 to 2016, the share of working-age men (defined as men between the ages of 25 and 55) either working or actively looking for work decreased from 91.8 % to 88.6 %. In 1996, 4.6 million working-age men did not participate in the labor force.

By 2016, this number had risen to 7.1 million, according to the US Population Survey. It's unclear exactly why this is true but the survey also shows that these men tend to be more educated than their fathers and grandfathers. Among the possible conclusions postulated is that they are not educated about the current jobs available as soft skills are becoming more in demand as technology replaces positions formerly male-dominant.

Additionally, median incomes have declined by 20% relative to inflation since 1980. With fewer jobs, lower wages, and higher prices, more men in this age group find themselves struggling to find housing and to engage in partnerships. With bleak outlooks for financial and housing stability, many self-isolate in hopes of focusing on getting stabilized.

But the cycle of isolation, depression, lack of stability, and income tends to pull them further into the cycle of homelessness which is hard from which to escape. It breeds a mood that Mark describes this way: "I feel like society is looking at me like I'm the problem. I'm sick of it. I'm not the whole problem,

that's for sure."

Summary:

Jackson County's homeless population is diverse. Jackson County has the largest, most visible population of young homeless people under 40. It also has more "outed" women who admit to homelessness and sleep unsheltered. Of those who have young children virtually all have partners and sleep either in vehicles or on properties offering work trade.

The senior homeless population appears to be nearly evenly divided between men and women with slightly more men than women. In Jackson County many of these seniors depend solely on emergency shelter, temporary housing through an acquaintance, or programs available through nonprofit programs. Many are unsheltered for much of the year.

A smaller percentage of homeless seniors live illegally in sheds or backyard structures for which they pay rent. One man who did not want to be named said he lives on a property in a garden shed he was allowed to insulate which has an extension cord for power. It does not have running water or a bathroom. He pays \$400 per month for the shed and allows an older lady he met on the street to put her sleeping bag there as well.

He says there are several other seniors on the property living in similar circumstances. He also says numerous seniors are living in old RVs and fifth-wheels on rural properties and paying up to half their social security checks on rent. "Once you get older and you really can't work, you have few options. You have to take what you can get and not complain about it or you won't even have that."

Many homeless seniors have additional health struggles and disabilities which make being unsheltered more difficult. On any given night you will find a dozen or more seniors still wearing hospital bracelets from their latest hospitalization. There is no current transitional housing for those recently discharged and still ill. Many suffer from chronic respiratory illness, arthritis, diabetes, heart disease, and poor circulation. Many report foot, neck, and back issues.

Much of the population throughout the county is comprised of local people who have lived in the area for five years or more. Many work or have worked in traditional jobs in industry, retail, or agriculture. Some have seasonal work in the developing Cannabis industry. Few are traveling through.

Of those surveyed, roughly 150 persons, fewer than five indicated they were considering moving through on their way to a different destination. None of them were seniors, two were a partnered couple, two were young men, and one was a woman in her early 40s.

Those not originally from the area are from larger cities where the sheer numbers of homeless people create competition for services and a feeling of chaos. One young man, Mark describes it this way, "It's noisy and crowded. Everywhere you go there are long lines and waiting. And the size makes it more difficult just getting from one place to another. You can walk all day. They have buses but they aren't free." He also expressed hope that he might have an easier time getting a job in Jackson County that can

cover room rent. “It’s hard to get in to see anyone about a job especially when you’re homeless I thought maybe a smaller town would be more welcoming.”

Additionally, food scarcity while being addressed by numerous church groups and non-profits remains a part of the daily struggle for Jackson County’s homeless. It is especially difficult for college students who do not qualify for SNAP and children younger than five not yet in school to qualify for free breakfast and lunch programs. Additionally, younger children require dense nutrition and greater number of sleep hours for development which is more difficult to accomplish in a vehicle. Homeless parents with children will travel long distances between food banks and community meals to get food for their families If they do not have a way to prepare food the cost of fresh fruit and vegetables can be difficult in areas of the county with less access to discounted stores. For those in Medford, there are greater discounted food options.

While there are medical providers in Jackson County, many of the area’s homeless still frequent emergency rooms for care especially in conditions that recur or grow worse over time. Part of the reason for this, according to those surveyed, is due to wanting to have a place to be during off clinic hours when they are ill.

There were few complaints about transportation except from those needing more assistance than reduced fare programs can offer. It is \$28 for a one-month reduced pass.

Many expressed disappointment regarding a lack of lockers or safe places to leave backpacks while they seek jobs or navigate daily life so they don’t “look homeless.” A lack of public, open restrooms at night, safe places to park at night for sleeping, and a general lack of public space for sleep and rest are the chief concerns of Jackson County’s homeless. Many of whom report multiple contacts with police, multiple citations for trespass, sleeping, smoking or littering.

As Mark said, “How can it be a crime to exist?”

Yet, hope exists even now, even in the despair of a growing homeless population. I want to tell you about Randy. A man, homeless in the Rogue Valley for more than twenty years, he camped in the woods outside Ashland and walked into town or rode his bike daily. Randy subsisted on his SNAP card and the kindness of strangers. I’ve been his friend for a decade. Randy tried to apply for housing several times but something always went wrong until finally, he tried again. After more than two years he was given his keys. He now lives in a small apartment and teaches chess. He has come back to life

Here’s his story, it was first published online and then in the Ashland Daily Tidings before the Associated Press picked it up. It has been shared thousands of times. Randy carries a laminated copy which he displays next to his sign.

Randy Dollinger, 63, homeless 15 years

Sitting in the shade of a tree at Lithia Park, any day of the week and most times of the day, Randy Dollinger has his chess board out.

A small sign reads “Chess?”

The peaceful scene gives no clue as to the long road Randy has traveled. “I always wanted to make money with chess, somehow,” the 63-year-old Ashland resident tells me while waiting for his next student. That yearning was born of a short, tragedy-infused career in the cutthroat competitive world of tournament chess. It is as unforgiving as it is unyielding.

He began playing chess in his native North Carolina at the age of 12. Within two years he rose through the fierce world of tournament chess to eventually become the state champion at 17, ranked tenth in the nation.

Randy was among the few young, elite champions of his day, even spending time with international chess prodigy Bobby Fischer. “He showed me an opening which helped me win a tournament He came to watch me play.” He smiles, “Sometimes people can’t believe that story But it’s true.”

At the pinnacle of his playing, Randy had one of his games published. “Two pages in Chess Life. It went all over the world.”

“I played in all the great cities, I played in 30 tournaments.” He eventually became the only chess player with the ranking of “expert” bestowed by the US Chess Federation in his home state. “People came from all over the East Coast to watch me play.”

He was unstoppable until it ended just five years into his career—in the seat of his friend’s car. “I was 17. The passenger in a car, “he says slowly and thoughtfully. “We got into a wreck My friend lost control and ran into a tree.”

Randy was injured in a life-altering way. “I was in a coma for a week Then the doctor said it’d be a couple years before my brain would be back in order before I could do the things I had been doing.”

But he couldn’t wait. He lost patience. He had to get back in the game He went against his doctor’s orders and went back to playing. “I came to tournaments with my head bandaged, walking on crutches.”

He could not accept it. Randy feared if he took too much time out he would be forgotten.

“I started playing too fast. I lost tournaments, I lost rating points.” Randy leans in and tells the story which changed his life. He is not dramatic but matter-of-fact and precise. He describes being in a tournament with a crowd looking on and suddenly going blank, not knowing what to do. He had never experienced that before. “I just understood the game right away I always knew it and then I suddenly just couldn’t get it to work. I would have these moments where I would freeze.”

His ranking fell. His sponsors withered. At 17, he felt finished.

“I stopped playing. It was too disappointing.”

Randy began traveling, trying to find himself outside of chess. He became a meditation student, a wonderer, and often homeless.

He came to Ashland 25 years ago. For much of that time, he camped outside and sought refuge in coffee shops.

But he never fully gave up on chess. "I've been studying the game."

Most people never knew his story. Briefly he was rediscovered but once again the game left him wounded.

He was offered a sponsorship to play a tournament in Grants Pass more than a decade ago. "I did great I won second place. People gave me offers to play and teach." But he couldn't do it. "All the fear and apprehension came back. I literally had a horrible headache for three days I couldn't sleep."

He figured it was too much. He gave up his dream again.

"I studied but hardly ever played. I wouldn't play. I couldn't do it."

Randy says despite all the disappointment and pain he still had the hope that somehow, one day the game would come back to him.

"Then there was this brainstorm; just set up my chess board and tell people I'll teach for compensation."

He sits on a bench most every day, all day, just within the sound of Lithia Park's cellist with his board, hoping for a game.

"I'm enjoying it again I love it, plus I'm making a little money." He works by donation. He offers a game for a suggested five dollars, and ten gets you a lesson from the master.

His years of patience show. "Everything revolves around the four main squares in the middle," he tells a student who stopped her stroll to play. "Every square means something That's the power of the game."

Oakland resident Emily Santiago says in twenty minutes he improved her game. "He's completely changed my strategy for playing. Chess is like life, I have to keep my most powerful pieces and leverage them," she says while staring intently at the board. "I learned to delay gratification."

Randy's life story could be told as one of delayed gratification. He's waited decades for chess to pay him back for his devotion. "I wanted to support myself with chess 45 years later and I'm finally doing it."

Marcus Brown is nine He's visiting with his family from Arizona. The chess board is calling to him as he circles Randy, looking at the pieces. Randy says he loves teaching children, because he knows the power of the game. "I think it's important to build skills, to plan and strategize," says his mother. Bobbie Marcus is not talking, he is only sitting with the pieces and Randy. "Every game is now," says Randy as he interrupts our discussion, "I have to concentrate."

Twenty minutes later, Marcus leaves the table. "That was great! Good job," Randy encourages his student. He takes a sip of water and a breath. "I never knew how to give this gift to society. The only way to do it is to set up my board and wait It requires me to be patient You have to be patient in life and chess."

He smiles. His green eyes shine under his gold wire-rimmed glasses looking the part of the master. His fingers graze the pieces. He looks up and says to a couple passing by, "You want to play chess?"

Of the half a million Americans counted as "chronically homeless" which means on the streets for more than a year, it's estimated only about 15% escape it. Randy is an exception to that rule which makes his story so hopeful for the thousands who read it.

The Helpers

In Jackson County there are numerous agencies hard at work to help:

Access offers everything from rental assistance to temporary placement. They have long had a robust program to assist people so they don't fall into homelessness.

Saint Vincent DePaul also has housing units for individuals and families who fall into homelessness as well as Rogue Retreat. Hearts with a Mission and the Maslow Project focus on youth who are homeless or on the verge of becoming homeless through work with kids and families.

United Way of Jackson County also offers direct assistance to the homeless, as does Ashland Community Resource Center, but neither has housing programs directly.

Southern Oregon Jobs with Justice offers warm meals six days per week. They also umbrella Vehicles for Changes which creates tiny homes out of buses for homeless children and families.

Understanding Homelessness: Grants Pass

Josephine County's history is one of logging, farming, and manufacturing. But over the years, an increase of jobs in education and healthcare has created demand for a higher educated workforce. A steady decline in manufacturing and logging jobs left many blue-collar workers seeking out opportunities that paid less, such as retail. For those working, especially in two-income families, the median is around \$40,000 annually. But home prices have increased 12.6% and are expected to rise by another 7.5% this year, according to Zillow.

As we drove north through the mountains of Southern Oregon, to the picturesque small town of Grants Pass in Josephine County, an old arch lovingly preserved over a town of antique shops, diners, and some newcomer organic food stores and eateries greeted us. The sign boasts, "It's the climate." But for those living and sleeping outside the winters can be long and damp and the summers hot and dry. In the hot months, if brush fires occur, which they often do in the wooded hillsides, the smoke pools in the valley making breathing rough in an already difficult existence. We interviewed roughly 100 homeless people in the region in the hot late summer and early fall months, during a wildfire when smoke hung low as we sat on curbs and benches for these discussions.

We defined homeless as anyone without a stable place to live with their name on the mailing address. This included people on the streets, in the Gospel Mission, in cars, and doubled up on friends' or relatives' properties temporarily.

The people you'll meet on these next pages are homeless in Grants Pass. They generously offered their stories.

Marcell, 61, homeless for one month

The mornings are the toughest for Marcell.

The relentless struggle of a life lived outside weighs her down. The nights grow colder She talks to me in whispers, afraid of what people think. Cars pass by. Marcell says she worries she looks like a bum holding a cardboard sign on a busy street corner.

Most people don't react to her at all. The few who do will yell at her.

"Get a job! They'll yell that as they pass me or just honk and glare. I had a job. I get Social Security but who's going to take that for rent It's not enough anymore."

Marcell says it's harder to hide her homelessness on her face and clothes. She struggles to keep clean.

She tells me that the first moment each day is like becoming homeless all over again. She describes it this way: her mind and body stir to consciousness; the feelings return of cold, wetness, and a vague sense that this will drag on and on.

Hope, she says now, is a bad sign. "It's better not to feel anything."

Rising from her hiding spot behind a store, her hip, which needs surgery, aching from laying on the pavement, and her feet sore from being kept in shoes, discreetly taped to cover holes, all day every day, all night every night.

It makes her feel like her body is breaking down.

Still, the hardness of her life is not immediately apparent. If she did not have the sign and the shopping cart of little things: extra socks, sweaters, duct tape, rope, she could pass as housed. Her long hair is shiny and combed. She tries to keep it clean to hide her situation, although now she's flying a sign, and she shrugs, "Maybe there's no point in that either."

But passing still matters "I don't like people looking at me like a transient. No one wants you around They won't even let you buy coffee inside if you can't pass."

Marcell tells me she is tired.

With a glance to the side she looks as if she can picture her old life: waking with her husband, making

breakfast for her son. Warm showers, coffee, some eggs, perhaps toast.

She sighs, looks at me and looks down at her cart. It's all changed.

"I get scared. I don't like to be outside," says the 61-year-old as she sits quietly hoping for shelter, as the nights begin to turn cold in early October.

She moved to Cave Junction to be with her sister when rents escalated in her hometown of Eureka, California. Her social security check could no longer cover rent in the mobile home where she lived, raised her son, loved her husband, and planted in the spring.

It went wrong so fast. Marcell is still in shock.

"She [her sister] beat me up pretty bad. She'd done it before but I thought that was in the past. I was wrong. I had to get out of there."

Marcell shows a yellowing bruise on her face near her eye.

Having nowhere else to go she wound up on the street sleeping, foraging for food, and trying hard not to be victimized. That is the part she thinks about often, too often, she says

"My anxiety gets bad and my mind starts playing tricks. I can't sleep and even eat I'm afraid someone will come up on me when I'm not looking."

She was given money to stay in a Motel 6 by a local nonprofit, UCAN, for a few days. "Oh, I'll tell you those days were so wonderful I took a shower twice a day and slept. It was heaven." But then it was over.

For the first time in her six decades of life, she was outside with no options.

The narratives of Grants Pass homelessness closely compare with the story of unsheltered people across the western US. The numbers continue to rise, the fastest growing demographic is people more than 50 years old, those with disability and social security benefits, but who cannot afford a place to live on their incomes in a housing environment with few rentals available.

Marcell is living on the survivor's benefits after her husband died 12 years ago. She sits in front of the Grants Pass Safeway with her sign hoping someone will help her find shelter. She is without a car and spends her nights with her adult son outside.

She currently receives \$958 in social security benefits and roughly \$150 in food stamps each month. "Unless you drive a Mercedes, no one will rent to you," she says, explaining that her money doesn't go far in a community where the average rent for an apartment is more than \$1,200 per month and requires proof of three times that in monthly income.

When her husband first died she was able to rent a small place on her own, do some odd jobs, and make it work. "It wasn't really fancy or anything but I got by and that was good enough for me."

Now, more than a decade later, she can no longer get by. She did not know times would change so radically and at her age and condition it's too late to get a job.

Yet, she believes somehow, she'll find a roof and a door that locks. "It has to happen eventually. It can't go on like this forever, can it?"

Her focus is divided each day between getting through the day and trying to get off the streets. She has to find places to use a bathroom, locate food and not get too many complaints from businesses. "They'll trespass you."

"We're still looking, but we're on foot," she says.

Meantime, her 36-year-old son sits by her side. He looks for work daily. "I have some job opportunities coming up but it's hard to just leave her all day on the sidewalk while I work. She gets very anxious and depressed and I'm afraid to leave her alone," says Arthur.

He was not living near his parents when his dad died and he doesn't want to lose his only surviving family member.

"She is my family I want to take care of her for the rest of her life."

Arthur believes they are in a temporary hard spot. "Between her social security and me getting even a minimum wage job, we'll come up with something. We don't need to live big and we have each other, so we'll make it."

He is caught in a cycle of wanting to have a safe place for his mom to be while he works but not being able to get a place without working first. "As soon as I have a place where she can be okay, I can go to work."

The lack of a space where one is welcomed is a consistent concern for the homeless of Grants Pass, who have few places to lawfully exist during the day and at night.

There is no place she knows of that is open for more than five hours at a time where Marcell could drop in each day, especially if Arthur has to work weekends, which he finds likely, as a new hire. "She has a lot of anxiety which spins into paranoia. I am here to keep her calm. We don't want this to get even worse."

"I can stay in the library and read," Marcell smiles. "It might be nice to have the quiet." But the library may also trespass homeless people. It's not clear if Marcell is aware of this fact.

Arthur says he's never looked down on homeless people but he's surprised to be one of them. "I've always figured things can happen, but I never figured it for me. I've always been able to do something."

Arthur and Marcell are among the many changing faces of homelessness. Specific to Grants Pass is a large number of people sleeping entirely unsheltered. Of the roughly 100-person sample size for this project, approximately half sleep without vehicles or even temporary shelter of any kind, including a place where they can set up a tent.

In other West Coast surveys I completed, there are tent cities, drop-in homeless shelters or areas of complicity where the homeless may congregate without penalty.

Other communities also seem to have more people with cars or recreational vehicles which they can move from place to place. In Grants Pass it would appear the homeless have few to no resources and often sleep anywhere they can find an awning or a place that will not file trespassing charges.

They are getting fewer as well. "They'll give you a ticket if they find you," says Marcell.

Additionally, the homeless of Grants Pass are not passing through. In our survey, we found only 15 people who were interested in leaving the area. The rest identified Grants Pass and its nearby surrounding areas as "home." This stands in opposition to other Northwest communities, where between a quarter to a third of homeless interviewed said they travel throughout the region, often seeking paid work or work trade for housing.

Summary:

- People over 50 are the fastest-growing homeless demographic
- People on fixed incomes such as Social Security are the most vulnerable
- Grants Pass is unique in the number of those who sleep entirely unsheltered
- The majority of homeless in Grants Pass identify as local

Colleen Bannon, 70, homeless for 3 years

This commitment to Grants Pass may also have to do with the population's age. The majority of homeless people we interviewed, roughly 60 percent, are people more than 40 years old.

Many were on the high end of the demographic, at older than 70, like Colleen Bannon. Colleen drifts from parks to public buildings to areas between dumpsters. She's lived this way for three months now.

"They [police] don't like it much when they find you out here. Those cops would be just as happy kicking out your teeth as dealing with you when you're homeless. I think they like waking me up and telling me to move along," says Colleen, who also says she's had more run-ins with law enforcement in three months since she's been homeless than in her entire life before.

"When I was housed, I thought they were the good guys I doubt that now."

Her troubles started three years ago when the landlord of her mobile home park told Colleen her double-wide mobile home was not up to standard for the community. He told her to move it or get a new one. Colleen tried for months to find someone to help her move her home.

"I couldn't afford to hire a truck to take it somewhere else," Colleen says. She ran out of options so

quickly, she's still in shock. "I drove away from my home of fifteen years with nothing but my clothes. And the worst part is that the landlord turned around and sold my mobile home and had it taken somewhere else. He didn't give me the money or an explanation. He said it was abandoned and belonged to him."

She lived in her car for the next three years until it began having engine trouble. When she had to park it in one place too long, it got impounded. Now she sleeps anywhere she can find. "It's not as bad in the summer when you don't have to think about rain and snow."

"The whole thing makes me timid. I'm scared all the time I don't want to be by myself."

Colleen has COPD and a laundry list of other conditions. "I can't breathe. It's why I walk so slow. I use a scooter but two have already been stolen. The police run us out all the time. They kicked us out of the library. They get rid of our stuff. I lost my teeth." She says she's asked for help when her things are taken but claims the police do not take her seriously because she is homeless.

When conducting the survey I was stopped and questioned three times by officers as I sat with a group of homeless people across from the mission. Bag checks are somewhat normal in my observation. I was told at one point to provide proof of my identity with any official paperwork I might have and was directed to get in a police car on another occasion. I did not comply. I was not detained or threatened but witnessed others questioned more extensively.

When asked, officers told me they were making certain people were complying with the law including trespassing and use of drugs or alcohol. As to asking for my identity and a request to go with them, I was told it was for my own protection. I was asked what I was doing a total of three times by the same law enforcement team. I did not pursue a further line of questioning with the police.

Colleen says living on the streets unsheltered is dangerous due to its health and safety impacts, especially for older women, like herself.

"Assault is part of life out here I won't say I get used to it but I've seen it, experienced it some," and, Colleen says, if you can survive that then the cold and illness may kill you. "I lost four friends this year. There's tons of us [homeless]."

She says she gets tired of hearing that homeless people are drug addicts or mentally ill and so their plight is somehow their fault. Colleen says she believes it's why housed people "look the other way and why the police stop homeless people."

Her observations match the statistical reality of the makeup of homeless populations. Fewer than a quarter of those without a home are neither addicts nor mentally ill. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the number is one in five, or roughly 20 percent who are addicted or ill, based on 2016 numbers. However, that number is lower among homeless families as opposed to unsheltered, single adults.

Other agencies report higher addiction figures but they are provided by substance abuse businesses

who stand to benefit from higher intake levels. Neutral parties put the number closer to 20 percent.

Homelessness continues to rise across the country, according to the Coalition to End Homelessness. The generally agreed figure based on a 2016 count is 564,708. Demographics which include older adults make up nearly half, 280,000, children under 18 who are especially vulnerable, 380,000, and LGBTQ, 110,000.

In Oregon, the population grew by 6.6 % last year, with an estimated population of more than 13,000.

For this survey, we counted anyone who does not have a permanent or semi-permanent indoor, stable living place where they are legally allowed to stay and have services such as heat and water.

People living in vehicles are counted as homeless in this survey.

Seniors, children, people expelled from home based on orientation, and the disabled form the basis of the homeless population.

Safety nets once established have not kept up with the cost of living, according to surveys done on real estate costs, the rental market, and Social Security as well as Housing and Urban Development.

An assessment published by the National Homeless Coalition regarding the causes of homelessness, states:

“Research shows that the primary cause of homelessness, particularly among families, is lack of affordable housing. Surveys of homeless families have identified the following major immediate, triggering causes of homelessness: eviction; doubled-up or severely overcrowded housing; domestic violence; job loss; and hazardous housing conditions.”

Colleen mirrors the research as she is in the fastest growing homeless population of seniors, which now stands at half nationally and potentially higher in Grants Pass. A survey of roughly 25% of all recorded homeless people within the city according to the latest Point in Time Count, calculated between 400 and 500 homeless people within the city of 34,533 or just over one percent of residents are homeless in 2017.

It's likely, however, that number is higher given that the count is done on one day in January during the day when most homeless people are trying to find public spaces in which to shelter. Also, given there are no sanctioned camps, the homeless are harder to count in Grants Pass.

Considering that roughly three percent of students attending Josephine County Schools are homeless and Josephine County has a poverty rate of 18.8 %, it's likely the number of homeless living in abandoned houses and in areas outside the city limits, such as Williams, is not counted. We met several vanloads of homeless mothers and children picking up donated food who said they live in foreclosed homes in Williams and move from place to place as auctions occur. Many of the homes keep the water and the power on, and in houses without power, they reported using battery-operated camp lights and cooed outside on propane stoves.

None of these families allowed photographs of themselves or their homes because their activity is not legal. “We know it’s against the law. It’s trespassing, maybe worse, but we have tried to rent the homes and no one will let us,” one mother told us through tears. “How can it be illegal to keep your kids safe?” Two of the mothers worked and one took care of the youngest children in her van during the day. One mother reported being a drug and alcohol counselor with a husband working construction jobs. The other mother said she worked at a large retailer but was not married.

Homeless people tend to hide their homelessness for fear of being discovered and having children removed from their homes or incurring citations and jail time.

Passing as housed is a preoccupation for many homeless people to whom I spoke. Younger women with children, in particular, did not wish to identify as homeless.

But lack of housing creates instability The longer one is not housed, the harder it is to “pass.” Colleen Bannon describes it this way:

“I wasn’t unstable but after losing everything and being so ashamed all the time, I might be unstable now. I am no addict. Never have been. The economy has changed. That’s the truth. There’s no housing out here. You got first, last, and deposit. I only get \$1,063 a month in Social Security. I can make it, I can be alive, but there’s no quality of life.”

Colleen looks slightly hardened with her jaw clenched as she settles back on her elbows in a grassy lot. “I have to look tough to stay alive out here.”

We are talking on a September day when it is warm She is glad for Tuesdays at the Seventh Day Adventist Church because they don’t ask people to leave right away after lunch. “When I’m dead I guess I won’t be homeless. Or I won’t care I can’t go through the winter. It’ll kill me I know that.”

When I ask her about various services, she laughs and shakes her head of short brown curls. “I’ve signed up for everything there is. People talk about helping but they don’t ever do anything.”

As we sit, our conversation moves to silence. She looks at me. Her light brown eyes turn soft. Tears settle in the corners of her smile lines. She is a mother and grandmother Her voice is quiet discussing her family. “They help out how they can but they don’t have anything either.” She thanks me for listening. “That’s more than most people bother to do. I don’t think they even know we’re people It’s like we’re blocks of wood or something.”

Summary:

- 60% of Grants Pass homeless surveyed are people more than 40 years old
- Assault is reported as a regular occurrence for homeless people
- Fewer than 25% suffer from addiction or mental illness
- Josephine County has a poverty rate of 18.8%

- Roughly 3% of all school children are on the homeless spectrum
- Police contact is often reported as negative

Update:

Sadly, Colleen passed away after a long illness.

Debra, 58, homeless 5 years. Daughter 35, homeless, 5 years.

“I’ll go anywhere where I can be invisible,” Debra tells me. “It’s inevitable you’ll be assaulted.” The 58-year-old woman lost her job as a home health care giver several years ago, and says she couldn’t find another job when she lost her apartment shortly after being laid off. She was barely making it on minimum wage less than 30 hours per week. She had no savings and no backup plan.

Loss became her most common experience.

“I can’t keep a phone, it gets stolen. All my ID’s have been taken twice.” And she is ill.

Debra is an alcoholic but can’t drink anymore. “My health isn’t good. I have cirrhosis of the liver, fibromyalgia, memory loss, and brain damage.” She says she doesn’t care about drinking anymore. “I’ve lost interest in it. It’s ironic. When I thought about quitting before, I couldn’t. Now that I’m really sick, all I can think about is being well.”

She carries her clothes in a clean, white trash bag. She is religious about getting to a church to wash up and take care of the bit she has left. Debra describes herself as proud and tough but admits to being afraid as tears begin to form. “I can’t cry in public. That’s a death sentence.”

Her daughter, 35, is also homeless and a drug addict. Debra was beaten by drug dealers when she refused to give information on her daughter. “I wouldn’t tell them anything. If they see me talking to you and think you’re a cop, it could get bad,” she tells me while watching as people pass us on a sidewalk outside a church.

A man on a bicycle stops briefly. He is watching and listening. “Go away,” she tells him. “She’s not a cop. She works for AllCare,” I confirm the information and offer to show him ID. The man nods his head and rides off.

“That’s one of them. I can’t talk to you much longer,” Debra says as she begins picking her things up to walk away. She is moving quickly now away from me. “It’s not personal, okay? I’m sorry. I don’t think I should say more.”

She describes a life filled with stress and little sleep.

“When you’re sick out here, it’s hard to heal.” Her hands shake slightly. She is sorting her food quickly: fruit, vegetables, water bottles, and a can of Coke. “I try to eat as healthy as I can but there’s nowhere to

cook or keep things clean. If I were offered a job and a place to sleep, I'd take it so fast. I don't know how long I can last out here."

Debra won't leave Grants Pass because her daughter is on the streets there. "I won't leave her. I don't care what happens to me. I won't leave my daughter. It's my fault she's even out here. It's my fault she's like that."

She grabs her bags and quickly leaves. She does not look back.

Summary:

- Homelessness is often multi- generational
- Illness becomes more severe the longer a person is homeless
- Lack of access to cooking and eating healthy is a factor in long term health
- Assault and concern about it is prevalent

David Deans, 65, homeless for one year

"Maybe a person is not attractive, is older, and doesn't move as fast. There are endless reasons why people don't get hired, and when you're homeless you hit a lot of them." David Deans is 65 years old. Both he and his brother have been out on the streets of Grants Pass.

David finally got a job at one of the area's large retailers but he remained homeless. "This is a growing problem and it's going to get worse. You can't solve it by hassling people and telling them they can't sleep or sit. I honestly believe the worst problem is no jobs."

David said even when he got a job and worked, he couldn't make enough to qualify for housing for a long time. "I was outside on a couple of days when it was below freezing I didn't think I'd die but I know people do."

He describes his dilemma and those of many he met on the streets. "It's like you're not allowed to be human anymore. People need housing. People need a telephone and a closet. They need a place to cook a microwave dinner."

David slept on cardboard between a dumpster and a building to keep the wind off him and rummaged the trash for food before going to work. He would pass vacant lots and buildings and think, he told me, "Why are these places locked with no trespassing signs? If no one is there, why is it illegal for me to be there to survive?"

David describes daily life as a homeless person in Grants Pass. "The food truck runs out of food You can't find it, it's too far away to get there and when you do, the food is gone."

He says the Gospel Mission does not accept drop-ins, especially if you don't comply with its religious values or if you don't admit to being to blame for your situation.

"I worked all my life I went to college I'm not perfect, but if I didn't take all the blame, they wouldn't have me. I see people walk out of there so discouraged sometimes."

David says he wouldn't make up a story for services. "I was working. I wasn't a bum or lazy or drunk. I wouldn't say I was."

He witnessed acts of desperation.

"People will commit crimes so they have shelter for winter." He says he saw a homeless man throw a rock through a jewelry store window and wait for the police.

"Jails cost more. Why build more jails than shelters?"

Sitting on the curb in clean clothes and relaxed after finding a place to live, David describes himself as lucky. He says it used to be that homelessness was a temporary condition for some people, but in his experience, that has changed. "People become homeless and stay homeless."

David finally saved enough money working and kept checking the list for subsidized housing until his number came up. "I'm in a place now and have a job." David was at the free meals truck when I met him. "I still need help to get through the month without running out of food but it's not as bad as out there. We need places for people to stay. Tiny houses are better than nothing. They keep people from being attacked."

Summary:

- Working does not guarantee having a place to live
- Many people such as David work and are unhoused for periods
- Some people may commit crimes to be housed
- Faith-based shelters are not workable for many unhoused people

Steve, 50, homeless for 38 months

This is Steve, three days after being jumped by a group of angry young men whom he could not identify. "They yelled, 'What are you looking at?' When I looked the other way because I hoped it wasn't me they were talking to, they pulled up next to me and three of them got out of their car and started beating me. I try to be a tough guy but I didn't stand a chance They beat the hell out of me."

He was hospitalized with a broken nose, contusions around his eye, and a skull fracture. Two days after being attacked, he was back outside, sitting across from the Gospel Mission on Foundry Street where he

had spent the last year as a homeless man. “It’s not the first time I’ve had the crap knocked out of me, but it’s the first time it was a bunch of guys I don’t know and have never seen. I don’t think they’re local.”

Steve said his attackers first pulled up to the Gospel Mission and went inside. When they came out they were yelling and tossing garbage. “They looked pissed off.”

When he looked over, that was it. “They came wheeling up and didn’t even shut off the engine. They were swinging before I had a chance to figure out what was happening.”

For the homeless, being a victim of crime is more likely than committing a crime.

“No Safe Street: A Survey of Violence Committed against Homeless People,” a new report published by the National Coalition for the Homeless, finds that over the last 17 years, at least 1,657 people experiencing homelessness have been the victims of violence perpetrated for the sole reason that they were unhoused at the time. This number includes 428 men and women who lost their lives for being homeless and in the wrong place at the wrong time. It is easy to see a correlation between the appearance of laws criminalizing homelessness, and the increase of hate crimes or violent acts against homeless people.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, I found in my snapshot of homelessness in Grants Pass, that in this way it, too, follows the national study. At 50, Steve has been homeless for roughly three years after his divorce. A steel fabricator, Steve can give you a tour of his fences, railings, and decorative steel around Grants Pass. “I was good at it. I had jobs all the time but I started drinking more and showing up for work less. That can’t go on too long before your boss has to make a decision.”

Steve isn’t sure how drinking beer became a bigger deal in his life than other things, but he traces it back to depression and anxiety. “I felt sad and anxious so much, I couldn’t sleep. Then when my wife left me, I guess that was it.” He went through a program at the Grants Pass Gospel Mission but washed out. “Once you fail they don’t give you more chances. I’ve asked to go back, especially now that I know I want to get off the streets and stop drinking, but they won’t let me in. They saw I got beaten up but nobody came to check on me.”

Still, he says his homelessness is his fault. “I don’t need to be here. My alcohol abuse has allowed me to burn everything to the ground.” Steve says he wakes up and can’t quite believe this is his life. “It’s the mornings, the physical addiction part, I get depressed, I get afraid and I drink.”

The lack of safety on the streets bothers him more now. “My therapist told me I live in a kind of world that I don’t know how it works.”

Growing up in Berkeley, Steve says his life was middle class and pretty good. His dad wasn’t affectionate and he doesn’t think he ever said he loved him but he was safe. “But even then, something was off. I started drinking probably before I hit high school.”

He says it’s nearly impossible to get sober while being homeless. And he’s tried not to be homeless. “I

got a voucher and I tried to find a place to live, but I couldn't find a place that would rent for the price. I was in a motel for a week, I stayed with a friend for a few days but then I was back out on the street. Within two weeks I was drinking again."

He hopes to get sober, get a job, and find a place to live. "I just want the simple things I used to have. This isn't for me anymore. I can't do it." Steve had been sleeping under a Japanese maple in the shadow of a rock-climbing gym. "I picked up after myself and got permission to be there." He didn't feel safe but he thought he had it somewhat worked out until less than a week after being attacked he was told to leave. "The police woke me up and told me to go. I don't know what happened but that tree was my only safe spot and that went away too."

Steve's story has a different, more optimistic ending. A patient through AllCare, he was assigned a therapist and a case worker. He qualified for a rehabilitation program and made it through the program. He graduated sober and is now living in an apartment and working full-time with frequent overtime. He is convinced he won't wind up back out on the streets and credits AllCare and this survey with saving his life. "If I didn't get the help and the opportunity to see myself as I really was, I don't think I'd be here today. Being able to talk about myself and being heard made a difference for me."

Summary:

- For the homeless being a victim of crime is more likely than committing a crime
- More than 400 people have been killed solely for being homeless
- It's far more difficult to overcome addiction while being homeless
- Intervention by a case worker who offers housing is effective

Update:

Steve is now employed and housed.

Danica Brammer, 36, homeless for one day

Danica Brammer, 36, is staying at her best friend's house with her four children, her friend and her friend's two kids. Brammer and her children sleep in a partially-finished garage.

She had been housed with her boyfriend until he snapped and turned violent. "He started getting angry. He began throwing things." Eventually, he hit her in the face with a large spoon. "I did not see it coming."

She shows me where makeup is covering the bruises on her face near her nose. Her eyes water when she touches it. "It's still tender. I thought he broke my nose for a minute."

On this day, she picked up boxes of food and clothing for her children from a church that offers a thrift

shop. Her next stop, she said, would be the Department of Health and Human Services, as well as any other programs available. "I don't like having to use services, but I've got to do my best for my children. If it means getting help for a little bit, I'm going to do it."

Danica plans on going back to school to get her real estate license. "It's just me and my kids I have a future to provide for them It's that determination I need I'm a strong, independent woman."

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, Danica's situation is an everyday statistical reality:

"Data is limited, but recent statistics suggest that on a single night in January 2016, 12% of the overall homeless population, 70,000 people, reported having experienced domestic violence at some point. Research from a study in New York City indicates that one in five families experienced domestic violence in the five years before entering a shelter. Among families that reported domestic violence in the prior five years, 88% reported that it contributed to their homelessness 'a lot.'"

In Oregon, domestic violence shelters do not have enough room to support the women and children in need. In Grants Pass, there is a safe house which supports 13 women and their children. The Women's Crisis Support Team may also provide short term vouchers for motels to those in crisis. However, at any given time there may not be beds available.

"I'm glad I don't need to stay at a shelter. They don't have the room. But when I called my friend she said she'd make it work. She didn't want me staying there [with her abuser]."

"The kids are doing okay," she tells me "They've had it hard and they're sad that this person got stressed and angry."

But she vows to keep the children together and with her. "When I'm proactive with a positive attitude, it gets better."

I ask her what her family life is like when she and the children feel safe. "We like all kinds of music. We love to dance around. And we're foodies. We love cooking and trying new things." Danica says there have been times when they've run out of food and have to improvise. "I make it fun by combining ingredients and they do it with me so we can laugh about it and make it an adventure, you know?"

She looks back toward her friend and smiles "Being happy and laughing is important."

Danica tells me they are going to make it. "We have a lot of support. We're going to be okay. I feel bad for moms who don't have the friends and family we have. Without them, this could be a whole different kind of story."

Summary:

- 12% of the homeless population has experienced domestic violence
- There are not enough shelters to accommodate those suffering

- Grants Pass currently has room for 13 women to escape domestic violence
- Limited voucher programs cannot meet demand

Miriam, 42, homeless for 18 months

Miriam is in the habit of smiling easily and shaking hands with strangers. A former loan officer, she walks up to me confidently. “I heard you wanted to speak to me?”

We are at a church that offers coffee, charging stations, and Wi-Fi as well as assistance filling out forms and emergency help. I’ve told the two men running the table where people plead a case for microloans that I’m here to listen. At first, I assume Miriam is representing the church and may have questions about this project.

As we begin, I realize she is homeless, she sees the recognition flash across my face. “It happens a lot. People don’t think I look like the kind of person who would be homeless. But I’m exactly the kind of person—a single mom with kids and no matter how hard I work, I can’t get ahead enough to save up the first, last, and deposit.”

Miriam was housed, living, and working in California. She moved to Oregon to be closer to her mom but had no idea how hard it would be. “My family didn’t have space for us after all I had a job but absolutely nowhere to go. We went to the Mission, but my oldest son was too old to stay with me. He was twelve. He had to go to Hearts with a Mission. It killed me to divide my family.”

They remain divided. Her oldest boys now stay at friends’ houses. She keeps her youngest son with her and they sleep in the car. “He started having behavioral issues. He is seeing a therapist. Shelter life was too chaotic. He’s only six and he’s running out of control.”

Miriam has applied for Housing and Urban Development vouchers and she’s on several waiting lists. “I’m on all the lists but I’m not getting picked.” Waiting lists can be up to three years for subsidized housing. Many low-income housing units are not even available for a waitlist.

She says she feels hardened sometimes about a system that doesn’t seem to work for her and other women like her. “I want to work and make money and have it be like before. But if I can even get a job, it’s not enough hours to support my family. And if my son gets sick or has problems, even one time if I have to leave, I’m out of a job.”

Miriam also says applying for rental housing costs her \$35 each time. “I’ve spent what little money I have applying. Each time it costs me and each time they say no. It doesn’t seem like there are rules about that. They could put a place up for rent and make enough money just on applications That doesn’t seem right or fair.”

Oregon law has certain regulations about the application fee which include nondiscriminatory practices and a detailed explanation of the fee along with a receipt. If the prospective landlord does not screen

the applicant, they are, according to the law, supposed to return the fee. But to make that happen a prospective tenant would have to know they were not screened and they would have to demand the fee returned.

There are no limits as to the number of applicants a prospective landlord can accept and to whom they can charge a screening fee.

“I think they take the application and fee knowing they aren’t going to rent to you. They know there are a hundred people in front of you but they let you apply anyway. Now I ask more questions before I give them any money.”

In addition to being a loan officer, Miriam has been an office manager, and when she lived at the Gospel Mission she managed the schedules and intakes. “I’d like to have a managerial job. I am qualified for a better job.” Then, she says, she could afford child care and eventually a place to live. “I picture a yard and a dog An actual smooth schedule.”

Now Miriam spends most of her days and gas money looking for opportunities, juggling seeing her children, and making sure they have care.

Sleeping in her car is taking its toll. “I have really bad swelling in my feet and legs from sleeping sitting up. I’m anxious and I don’t eat right because there’s nowhere to cook. And my son has these behavioral problems from being homeless. My older boys resent me and sometimes they don’t want to see me. It’s been beyond difficult.”

She says people are shocked when they find out she’s homeless. “They feel safer in their cocoons not seeing this. It could happen to them and it’s too scary to think about.”

Yet, Miriam believes she will get a job and eventually a home, because of what she’s learned. “Even though I’m homeless, I’ve been blessed. I have so many skills now. I think if I interviewed they would see I’ve worked really hard, I’ve learned and gained experiences essential to my growth.”

She says the whole experience has taught her the value of community and says when she’s back working and housed she will help others “We shouldn’t hide from each other. Once upon a time in America we were a community.”

Summary:

- Homeless families are often divided so children may sleep inside
- Waiting lists for subsidized and low-income housing can be up to 3 years
- The process of applying for rentals can drain small savings
- Communities may not recognize its homeless due to attempts to blend in

Brianna, Bryan, Kendalyn and Skyler, homeless for two weeks.

On an August day, Brianna, Bryan, Kendalyn, and Skyler are making breakfast at 7:30 am and it's already getting warm. The small family is staying at Schroeder Park just outside of Grants Pass. At \$25 per night, Bryan says it's expensive, roughly \$700 per month before factoring in paying for coin-operated laundry, but they can cook their own meals and it's safe. "We're just trying to make it a vacation for the kids until we get settled. When we're not looking for work, we take little road trips for the kids."

The George family packed up and left Utah for Oregon on August 7th. Brianna's mother is soon to follow. "We couldn't get health insurance for our kids out there and the pay is really bad. Minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour and if you get tips, it's less." He's worked in restaurants and managed fast-food places.

The parents also both suffer from illness and injury. He sustained a serious back injury and she grapples with bi-polar disorder. "They just wanted to put us on pills We have children. We can't be zombies and we don't want to live off of disability. We have more of a life planned than that."

Their plan is to work alternate shifts so a parent can be home with the kids—if they can find a home. "It's really difficult, especially if you're trying to give your kids a better life." They've applied to several apartments and homes for lease but so far, nothing. They are considering buying an RV. "We may have to move it around but at least we'd have a roof," Brianna says. "I just don't want to be out here in a tent when school starts and it gets cold. The kids need a place to be with heat, light and water."

The Georges say they'd prefer a normal home but they are thinking they need a backup plan. "We've been through a lot of rental companies. They were more after money than anything. Oregon people are open and kind, it's not the people, it's just the property managers. You can't make enough money to make it work and that's if you can even find a place."

Their campsite is set up with a small wading pool full of balls and toys, there is a temporary swing and the children have bikes leaning against the picnic table which is filled quickly with eggs and cereal. "I'm going to get better at camp pancakes," quips Brianna as I watch the feast unfold.

Both parents are smiling "As long as the kids are okay That's all that matters."

Summary:

- The West attracts those seeking higher minimum wage
- Families relocate for child health insurance offered in Oregon
- Legal Cannabis is a factor for those injured or ill in moving west
- Scarcity of work force housing keeps some homeless
- Temporary lodging makes saving more difficult

Chastity, 35, homeless for five months

Across the campground Chastity is getting her morning started. Her daughter Lilly is playing near her and her husband Levi is just getting off the night shift as a Nurse's Assistant. "There are so many families out here and with the judgments, it's harder." She takes a sip of her coffee just off the campfire. "It's become an epidemic It's not been our fault What's society going to do if it keeps on like this?"

The family had worked and lived in Medford. They had been renting the same house for four years when the owner decided to remodel and sell. The timing was terrible. "I left my job because I was sick. I have a prolapsed uterus and bladder. It's painful I need a hysterectomy and I'm waiting."

She says they initially moved in with her mother who has had addiction issues throughout her life. Both she and her sister were in foster care as children. When the family discovered that her sister, Angel, had been killed what small thread they had fell away. "Mom lost her mind to grief."

They came to Grants Pass to be nearer to her husband's job. They rented a campsite in Schroeder Park expecting to be there only a week or two. It's been five months. "Saving the money is the biggest obstacle. There's no place to park your car safely so you have to pay to camp and it takes all your money. It's \$25 per night and you can only stay 14 days then you have to pack up and go to a hotel for a few days and then find a new spot and come back."

At present, county parks do not have monthly rates nor are they set up for long-term housing. Vouchers for reduced or free camping are not part of a program so paying \$700 per month to live in a tent makes it tough to come up with money for a house or apartment. Additionally, families in campgrounds describe expenses associated with not being housed such as no refrigeration for food, so groceries go bad quickly, no free laundry facilities, and for those with children additional expense trying to keep the kids occupied when not in school since there are not the usual amenities of a home with games and supplies for children.

She says they keep applying for houses but get turned down, One house they were told they'd be first in line as soon as it opened up. "We waited five months to be told no."

She says each time they apply for a rental it's a \$35 fee. "You can't apply for multiple properties through a property manager. You have to apply and pay each time and then wait."

Chastity says she believes the system is rigged to shut homeless and blue-collar working people out. "They still take your money, \$35 for something that costs ten cents. You need a credit score in the 700s. How can you do that if you're homeless? It's a real struggle and you can feel you're getting judged."

She believes that there are not enough on-ramps for people who work and do not require addiction treatment. "There should be help for people who don't have addiction problems and have jobs."

Chastity says if she left her husband and claimed to be an addict, she could find a place to take her in with her daughter. "How is that fair?" Her claim may or may not be true depending on what programs an addicted mother might apply for, and individual wait times. Many addicted people also remain

homeless with children.

Chastity grew up in Grants Pass and does not remember it being a difficult place in which to make ends meet. “I want my town back where I was born and raised and where people knew each other and helped. Now it’s out-of-towners buying up land and houses to grow pot. They don’t even have people living in the houses. Some of them are converted to indoor grows. I’m all for legal pot but not at this price.”

She says her husband works full time, and then some, taking odd jobs and overtime whenever he can.

However, his base pay is \$14 per hour. When she is well, she plans on working full time as well but she doesn’t know if it will be enough. “We might be homeless for a while longer I’m about to give up and see about getting an old travel trailer and renting a piece of land. At least that way I could be safe with my family.”

She muses as she rests in her camp chair, “Nobody trusts each other anymore. Everything is harder.”

Summary:

- Homelessness can begin with a small event, a rental house is sold
- Lack of vacancies can spiral into long term homelessness
- Establishing credit and worthiness gets harder the longer one is without shelter
- People coming from outside the area to buy property forces local further out

Megan, 26, homeless for three weeks

Megan, 26, moved from rural Locus Grove, Georgia to Cave Junction when her dad lost his factory job. Her sister and husband have a small Cannabis growing operation and they offered their home to help her and her parents. “But when we got there, I realized it won’t work for me I have schizoaffective disorder and being around Cannabis makes it worse.” While professionals are not fully certain how this works in the brain, they have confirmed to Megan that use of marijuana is likely to increase her symptoms. “If I use it I relapse from my other medications and I get really paranoid. But being in a tiny house with it everywhere, it’s hard to avoid. My sister and I really don’t get along either. I’m actually better off out here.”

When we interviewed Megan, she had been on the streets of Grants Pass for roughly three weeks. “I hear how you can’t sleep out here. I don’t have enough sleep. I can’t live like this.” She tells me she cannot go back to her sister and she can’t stay outside. She says she has no idea what to do.

She describes physical as well as mental symptoms of being homeless. “I have physical pain in my feet.” She has only flip-flops. “A lot of people out here need shoes.”

For Megan, it's a combination that she says makes her paranoia worse. "I'm already thinking bad thoughts and then people tell me things that make it worse. I'm hearing about rapists out here. Between the lack of sleep and food and having to ask strangers for money, I am afraid all the time and I don't sleep. I just walk around all night looking over my shoulder."

From Megan's point of view, it would be better to allow homeless camps, since the issue "is not going away. I can't believe how many people are out here." She suggests that homeless people are victims of brutality in a variety of ways. "Let homeless people camp out. Let them sleep where cops can see them, so they're safe."

She is worried about illnesses spreading.

"Someone has got to do something about the needles. People are using dirty needles out here. AIDS is a terrible death."

Megan is concerned about her health and healthcare as well. She had Medicaid and Disability in Georgia. She does not yet have health insurance through the Oregon Health Plan. "I have two more months of medicines and then it's done. If I don't get the insurance taken care of it's going to get really bad."

Despite her disability, she finished high school and completed a technical college program where she graduated with a nursing assistant certificate. "I want to work but I just can't seem to keep my jobs."

Megan represents the approximately 40% of homeless people with disabilities, according to Housing and Urban Development statistics, which estimate that number is rising as benefits stay static and rent prices increase. She receives \$735 per month. She has no other income. When she lived with her parents she could make it work but without family support, she fears she will only get worse as a homeless woman. "My dad comes to check on me, gives me the money from my disability, and brings me things but he's struggling too. They don't really have any money of their own now. Our lives fell apart."

Megan says she plans to go to California where it's warmer for the winter. She does not know how she'll receive her checks from her father who is her legal guardian. "I don't know how it's going to work, but I feel like I just need to get out of here and try something for my own life."

When we spoke, she was on her way to meet him. I asked if I could speak with him as well and she asked me not to. "He wouldn't like me out here telling this story. It's not how things work back home."

Summary:

- Rural community job loss accounts for a rise in homelessness
- Adult children where a parent loses a job creates homelessness for parents and adult children
- Low disability payments accounts for a 40% rate of homeless people also being disabled

- Moving from one state to another can interrupt health care and prescriptions

James, 47, homeless non-continuously five years

James volunteers at “The ROC”, Grants Pass food pantry. He is 47 and suffers from fetal alcohol syndrome, learning delays, and other health impacts from being severely premature and weighing just three pounds at birth. “My parents were there for me but they were full-blown alcoholics.”

He says he was a special needs student for 14 years and bullied often, growing up in Bonanza, Oregon. “We worked the potato fields. My dad had a truck and we’d go out and keep up the fields.” James had hoped to do similar work but developed a seizure disorder in the sixth grade. “I could feel them coming on. I would hit my head hard against things to stop it. But nothing worked.”

He remained with his parents into adulthood, but by the time he was 28, both had died. “I’m a unique individual. I worked. I was a cabinet maker and had one job for 16 years. But then I started using meth and drinking No one could talk to me.”

He says he has been on so many drugs throughout his life that taking meth made him feel more awake and alive. “Otherwise I just think about the seizures. I hate them because I don’t know when they’re going to come. They take the life out of me and make it so I can’t control my body.”

James has been homeless for years, but rarely admits it. He tells people he is employed in food service and has an apartment. He was reluctant to talk to me “I ain’t homeless. That’s what I say but then I saw you’re a nice lady and you just want the truth. So I want to tell it I am homeless and I’m out here sick most of the time.”

Beyond battling addictions and his other cognitive health and seizure disorders James has severe athlete’s foot, accompanied by bacterial infections in both his feet. “It hurts so bad sometimes I just want them to take my feet off.” Because he is homeless, the normal treatments such as keeping feet clean and dry in breathable socks and shoes and being able to frequently wash and treat the infections are not available. “I can’t take my shoes off and get a nice shower every day. I run out of clean socks so it just gets worse. Sometimes I can’t even really walk.”

“Doctors try to help me, but they can’t, I guess. They took blood for years but no one can tell me what all is wrong with me and how I can stop having seizures That condition I was born with I don’t understand it.” James was also born with neonatal meningitis. Said to be a rare condition affecting 300 to 400 in 100,000 live births, he believes that, along with fetal alcohol syndrome, it created his cognitive problems.

“I don’t want nothing anymore from anybody. I just want to be seen and heard. I want people to know there are people out here like this and we aren’t so bad. We’re trying to be good. We want to do things that help other people.”

James is speaking from the passenger side of my car. He doesn't want anyone to hear what he is telling me. "This makes me really hurt to talk about it I get feeling out of control." He is weeping, and sometimes yelling out in emotional bursts of pain. "My hurt makes me more powerful."

He believes by volunteering and being around other people he can contribute and he hopes to become clean and sober once again. "I'm strong. It's there. I do have this positive energy."

Getting out of my car, James took a clean pair of socks and a water bottle. "You don't think it's anything talking to me and giving me this stuff. But it is something. It makes it better— what you're doing. I hope somebody powerful or important hears my story and cares about us out here."

Summary:

- Specific cognitive disability affects roughly ten percent of those who are homeless
- Many of those with cognitive disabilities are as a result of birth defects
- Multigenerational substance abuse may be a combined factor of environment and epigenetic factors (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4459901/>)
- Working or volunteering creates a sense of purpose and may provide needed stability for homeless individuals

Update:

James is now employed full-time as the Manager of the ROC and is housed.

Shelton, 36, homeless non-continuously since 12 years old

At 36 Shelton's life is difficult to piece together He grew up mostly in Oakland, California, on the streets. By the time he was 12, he was on his own. "My mother would leave for a month at a time She'd come back for food stamps, then leave again."

He got in trouble in school for cheating. "I was hungry and I did someone else's project in wood shop for money." He got suspended and when he came back, he began getting in trouble. "I started getting in fights and got expelled. I just quit going after that."

He describes a distant father who would sometimes find him and help for a few days or weeks. "He always had a bunch of money so he'd buy me stuff and take me with him when he went places For short periods of time I'd live like I was rich, and then he'd drop me back near my old apartment. He'd say I have to give you back to your mom but he knew she wasn't really around anymore."

"I was hungry all the time Dad had money but mom never did. The police would come to our neighborhood. My auntie would hold me to keep me safe but she couldn't keep me."

By the time he was 17, he had a record for selling weed and breaking into houses for a place to sleep. When he got out of jail, he met some guys who were recording rap music. “They had this thing, Black Market Records. They called me Young Game and let me record some stuff. They covered expenses but they never paid me or gave me money.” (<https://itunes.apple.com/ca/album/thug-nation/1286276816>)

That experience gave him the idea of work trade. He read about the possibility of working on a farm in exchange for a place to live. He wanted to grow food and be in a place with clean air and water and less crime. “I never needed cash. I operated with a different currency.”

He set his sights on Grants Pass and Josephine County as a place where he could get a fresh start. “I want to create community. Maybe someone will offer housing for cleaning or cooking or gardening. I’m creating a system of bartering.”

For Shelton, it hasn’t happened yet but he feels as if it will so long as he continues to look for opportunities. “I am committed to this strategy.”

Even so, in leaving, he asked if I knew anyone with whom he could sleep or be housed. “I’m kind of afraid of being out here. There’s not really anywhere where you can hide and sleep so I’ve been walking around all night and finding spots where I can nap during the day But my feet are swollen up with blisters.”

He asked me to put the word out that he’s willing and able to work in exchange for housing. “But I do want to be careful. Some people might not be good. I had one guy who was basically going to lock me in his shed when I wasn’t working. That’s some kind of kidnapping or something. So I am still looking, but not for that.”

He says even in his situation, or perhaps especially, he has to keep his head about him. “It’s sad and weird but people will take advantage of you when you’re out here struggling.”

Recent reports have revealed that some individuals use homeless people as illegal workers, paying far less than minimum wage, and housing them in sheds and closets in exchange for long hours at restaurants and farms. Also, large corporations such as those contracted to do clinical trials, may recruit homeless people who are willing to try experimental medicines in exchange for stipends.

Many of these trials may leave the subjects with lasting side effects (<https://medium.com/matter/did-big-pharma-test-your-meds-on-homeless-people-a6d8d3fc7dfe>)

It’s not clear how frequently these situations occur, but given that homeless people tend not to report their abusers and continue in situations longer than a housed person might, one could imagine it’s more frequent than we might think. One man who did not wish for me to use his name said he worked for three dollars per hour at a restaurant and slept in a crawl space. Sometimes he reported that the owner would abuse him verbally and physically.

“He’d throw hot grease from a pan at me or tell me I was a worthless old bum and no one would care what happened to me. I took it for five years but I started thinking he might do me some serious harm

because he got so he didn't want to hire anyone else and had me doing everything. I was getting tired and slow so he'd slap me around. One day I stepped out for a smoke and didn't go back. I had to do it, but I miss eating regularly."

Summary:

- Roughly 35% of homeless people were exposed to homelessness as children
- Homeless people are exposed to financial and physical exploitation due to personal basic need
- Younger homeless people are more open to a non financial bartering system
- People of color – particularly African- Americans – are a minority that is particularly overrepresented According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, 41% are non-Hispanic whites (compared to 76% of the general population), 40% are African Americans (compared to 11% of the general population) 11% are Hispanic (compared to 9% of the general population) and 8% are Native American (compared to 1% of the general population)
- Statistics around minority populations are based on the overall demographic, which in rural Oregon is primarily white, however among those homeless we surveyed in Grants Pass those in minority populations experienced a longer duration of homelessness

Josephine County Summary

Homeless people are vulnerable people. Many of the 100 or so individuals we contacted for this project in Josephine County would fit in the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) category. The study which lasted from 1995 to 1997 looked at roughly 17,000 Kaiser Permanente members receiving health exams, who answered a confidential survey that tracked childhood trauma occurrences with health issues and outcomes later in life. It created a study that linked household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death. Approximately one-third of those we interviewed suffered traumatic instances in childhood. Three of those who identified their homes as "normal" reported some form of sexual abuse or neglect.

Among the homeless who had a greater number of markers of childhood trauma, homelessness was a co-occurring experience along with illness and addiction. Those subjects also reported a longer duration of homelessness.

Yet, it would not be accurate to describe the majority of homeless people interviewed for this project as those suffering from childhood trauma as a cause for their homelessness. However, for those who had experienced trauma either in childhood or as adults, homelessness is said to be harder to overcome and longer lasting, according to their statements collected for this survey.

Those surveyed also reported a marked lack of family support, many of whom were estranged from larger family groups or who had experienced the death of family members. Others reported family

members unable to help due to their financial constraints. This was especially prevalent among the older homeless population who reported grown children either homeless or near homelessness as well.

While homelessness can be as complicated as every story and person sharing their story there are certain factors that play a role in the case of nearly all homeless people.

The factors listed in every instance of homelessness were as follows:

- Lack of residential vacancy
- Disproportionate income to rent for working persons
- Lack of housing for those on fixed incomes such as Social Security and SSDI
- Marginalized people one crisis away from homelessness such as missed work for illness, transportation issues, destabilization or disillusion of partnerships, rental sold or price raised
- Lack of family and community safety nets

Other Factors contributing to homelessness in Josephine County:

- Difficulty accessing resources to find and retain a job
- Transportation barriers to access services and employment
- Lack of options for daily or semi-daily showers and hygiene
- Lack of storage for backpacks and belongings (looking homeless)
- Lack of safe spaces during the day and night to rest
- Not having shoes or clean socks contributes to poor health
- Back and joint issues from heavy bags and nowhere to sleep
- Negative contact with law enforcement
- Lack of options for cooking and preparing food
- Acts of violence, theft and aggression toward the homeless
- High barrier entry to emergency shelter

The issues of homelessness and poverty are deeply interwoven. Those who are poor, unable to save and operating on a thin margin, are more likely to become homeless in the event of any unfavorable change to health, hours of work, dissolution of partnerships, family relationships, or transportation.

While the perception exists that homelessness occurs primarily as a matter of choice or due to poor behavior on the part of the homeless individual, the reality is that there is a growing number of people whose income has not kept up with the cost of housing which continues to rise as vacancy rates shrink.

In fact, significant data exists indicating pay has not kept up for decades and homelessness is now eventually following after personal safety nets are exhausted. (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/10/09/for-most-workers-real-wages-have-barely-budged-fordecades/>)

Part of the cause, specifically in Josephine, Jackson, Curry, and other rural counties, may be an unseen consequence of legalizing marijuana so that out-of-state growers and business-minded entrepreneurs are renting and buying properties to cultivate the cash-intensive crop, thus leaving the poor with fewer housing and land options. This information is largely anecdotal and requires more research.

It is but one of the many complicated factors informing the economy. Cutting benefits and federal housing programs, increasing medical costs, employers cutting worker hours and not increasing pay to match costs of living are among the many factors.

Additionally, a lack of blue-collar jobs, which have been largely outsourced, creates a gap for those who are not yet qualified in the expanding tech and engineering fields. Much like every other revolution in industry, tens of thousands are left behind.

In addition, the current disparity of wealth has many byproducts. Homelessness is among them.

Homelessness is not a direct result of addiction or mental illness. Not having a place to live, in addition to suffering from addiction or mental illness, contributes to the severity of those conditions but does not specifically cause homelessness.

In our observation, not being able to manage illness due to homelessness may contribute to the duration of living rough, but is not in itself a cause. Many of those whom we interviewed lost their residences through a variety of circumstances primarily related to a lack of emergency savings, safety nets stretched thin, and an inability to find another place to live.

The cause of homelessness in Grants Pass and in numerous places, especially in West Coast communities, is not having enough housing at an affordable price based on the median incomes of the workforce and those on lower income rungs who are disabled or retired. This is expressed as a lack of workforce housing and transitional and emergency housing in this state of “crisis” as declared by every major West Coast city.

The bottom line: to cure homelessness, communities need to create opportunities for more housing at costs that realistically reflect the incomes of the people who live there, in addition to attracting higher-paying employers. Additionally, emergency and transitional housing with a lower barrier of entry need to be developed in the meantime.

The Helpers

UCAN, United Community Action Network assists the homeless in finding affordable housing and offers housing grants on a per-person basis as well as other services to the homeless.

The Seventh Day Adventist Churches offer free showers, lunch meals, and a low-cost or free thrift shop for the homeless to access supplies.

The Gospel Rescue Mission offers housing for those willing to submit to their programs. They have a women's shelter and a men's shelter. They are primarily faith-based and offer housing, food, and job training for those who qualify.

River Valley Community Church offers daytime warming and cooling shelter, computer access, limited snacks, and assistance in finding housing.

ROC Food Pantry offers free food boxes and donated clothing to the homeless and poor of Josephine County as well.

Curry County Homeless: An Invisible Population

Curry County is the smallest community we surveyed with a population of roughly 22,000. Just over 14% live below the poverty line and it's considered a poverty hotspot by the Census Bureau. More than 70% of the residents have a high school diploma or less. There are few jobs outside of retail and small-scale agriculture and forest products. The federal government owns roughly 66% of land in the county.

Curry County is the southernmost coastal county in Oregon, with a population of roughly 22,000 people spanning three primary communities, and roughly 2,000 square miles. It is a poor community that survives on a fishery and lumber industry as its living-wage jobs. Otherwise, the economy hinges on summer tourism.

The largest population in the county is white women over 65. Median age is 55. Median rent, \$846 per month, and the median home price is \$244,000.

Incomes have decreased 11% since 2009. Median household earnings are \$44,000, but that's based on more than one working person in the household and represents a decline in income of roughly 3 percent from the year before.

In terms of homelessness, 64% of the homeless population is chronically homeless. There are 200 unsheltered people, according to Curry Economic and Community Development, however, according to the 2017 Point in Time Count as presented by Oregon Housing and Community Services, the number is 161 which is up from just 86 counted in 2015.

In our report we spoke with 100 homeless persons in one month. It would not be fair to indicate this number represents nearly one-third of the total homeless residents. What I found in my study of homelessness in Curry County is an underground population reticent to be seen due to frequent sweeps and few services. One thing is for certain, for those people living "rough" (sleeping unsheltered) whether that number is 200 or 500, there are few to no resources currently in place. We additionally spoke with advocates who attempt to provide services. At this time, they receive most of their resources through

private funding and donations,

Winding through the mountains near the rivers of Josephine County, it's impossible to miss the openness of this area rich in old-growth trees and bold, running water. Small towns crop up along the Redwood Highway with a gas station or store. There is something otherworldly about taking this road through the woods to the coast of Oregon known for its rocky shores and isolation.

While its beauty is front and center, its poverty is clear as well. In towns of just a few thousand, you see small tribes of homeless people with backpacks and dogs trudging down the highway or emerging from behind businesses. At first you might think they're traveling through but it becomes clear they are living rough along the highway. They are not seeking rides and some are flying signs seeking food money. There are virtually no services in many of these towns and one can imagine the level of difficulty in sleeping outside as the weather turns cold in December.

I am on my way to Curry County to find out what life is like there for the homeless.

The issues emerged quickly. We found the area has difficulty in retaining doctors and a largely hidden population of homeless people. Anecdotal information from those surveyed describes hostility from businesses and police. One woman told a story of being shot at while trying to put up a tent on the side of state highway 101, by a person staying in a condo overlooking her camp area. Curry County residents are considered to be living in a High Poverty Hotspot, as declared by the US Census Bureau, with 16% poverty rates compared to the State of Oregon's definition of a poor place, which is an area that has a poverty ranking of 14% of its population.

Our task:

- Interview roughly 50 individuals on the homeless spectrum & tell their stories
- Seek out resources available for those homeless and marginalized persons
- Determine needed resources from the perspective of the homeless and advocates What follows are the actual, lived stories of the homeless in Curry County

Melodie, 74, homeless for three years

"You have to wait until someone dies to get a place," Melodie tells me outside a homeless and low-income lunch at Star of the Sea Catholic Church in Brookings. She is sleeping in her truck and has been for roughly three years.

She's been on the Housing and Urban Development waiting list for low-income housing since 2014. They finally called her number, and she was moving into a studio apartment when she was told a mistake had been made. Because she worked as a caregiver and earned \$500, combined with her social security, pushed her off the list. "They said I made too much money even though I was living in my truck, hungry and sick."

Melodie was a busy caregiver for years. She had a primary client and several others whom she visited once or twice per week. But when her health deteriorated and her primary client passed away, there was no safety net.

“I lost my job, my health, and my home in 7 days.”

Melodie says she enjoyed good health all her life, but when she hit her early 70s, things started going wrong. She had to get her gall bladder removed and during surgery, she developed blood clots.

“I flat-lined.”

By the time she got back to her apartment a week after rent was due, she had an eviction notice. Her agency had moved her clients to other caregivers and she was struggling to take care of herself. Social Security of roughly \$1,000 per month kept her afloat briefly. but with no support of a job or a partner, she fell into homelessness waiting for low-income housing.

“There’s no way on Social Security that you can afford what they want you to pay. And for the subsidized housing—there were 200 people ahead of me.”

Now Melodie has a new hurdle.

She is grappling with bladder cancer. She received treatment at Three Rivers Hospital in Grants Pass, the nearest place equipped to help her. She was treated with the live TB vaccine, and has had four surgeries. She could not afford a hotel and the hospital did not provide housing while she received treatment.

“I slept in the parking lot. It wasn’t too bad except I snapped a few times when I had to go to the bathroom in the bushes. They really need to have a place for people to stay when they’re going through major treatments.”

Melodie says others were out there too and security tended to look the other way if they didn’t make a scene. But still, problems arose.

“I had my clothes and my medicine stolen when I forgot and left the truck unlocked.”

Ultimately, she suspects that her end is coming soon and hopes to have a comfortable bed to sleep in when she passes away.

“I just want this last quarter of my life to be peaceful. I’m trying but I’m getting tired. Every day is a gift. People think they’re in control of their lives but they’re not. Things happen beyond our control. Are we prepared for that?”

- A lack of affordable housing creates long waiting lists
- There’s no interim care for ill patients under care
- A lack of indexing Social Security to real costs of living creates homeless seniors

Freddie Romero, 35, homeless two years

“If people are hungry around me I’ll give my food away I’ll go hungry a week or a week and half.”

Freddie came to Brookings with his wife and three children from California. They hoped the fresh air and new start would give their children an advantage of seeing the world in a different, more nature-based way. But when Freddie struggled to find full time work the financial strain broke the relationship. His wife and children live in a home with her new partner. Still, he stays in the area. He has no other family.

“I want to be near my kids. When I get odd jobs I save the money and get a hotel so they can stay with me.”

He has a variety of trade skills and is a caretaker on a property for sale in Brookings. But he isn’t allowed to stay in the large, empty house. He instead lives in a shack on the property with no heat or bathroom. “I’ve been here a few months I was squatting and he let me stay in exchange for keeping other people off the property. He lives out of state and wants to sell this place, so this helps both of us.”

He worked seasonally at Hastings Bulbs and was glad to have the check, although for every ten dollars he makes he keeps only \$1.80. “It’s all child support. I got behind when I had no work. But it’s okay if it’s for my kids.”

Freddie struggles to get a full-time, living-wage job in Brookings. The ones that exist rarely have openings and when they do he has one more issue that puts him at the bottom of the list.

“I was a guy who made some mistakes I have a criminal conviction so even though I haven’t had a single issue, no contact with police at all, in more than eight years—it still shows up.”

His background, he says, causes people to look at him differently. “I just need a chance or opportunity—they think of me as a bad guy but I’m not. It’s really hard out here for homeless to have zero contact with police, but I stay out of trouble no matter what else is going on.”

He reports that the police and even the community in general doesn’t want to deal with homeless folks.

“There’s no real help here. They’d rather make it harder on people. The restrooms are locked and they keep single people out until they leave.”

And Freddie has health issues, including a hernia, which he says makes even walking painful.

“There’s no bus, nothing like that. Here, everywhere I need to go, I walk. And the only thing they got here is 5th Street clinic If you go there and you don’t have insurance, they don’t want to see you. I went to work with a blown knee and a hernia I don’t even bother to go there [the clinic] because they’re going to treat me a certain way.”

- There are few living wage jobs

- People with criminal convictions have few transitional career opportunities
- Transportation to work sites and medical clinics is not available
- A lack of doctors and clinics makes seeing a doctor difficult

Susie Hamilton, 50, homeless for one year

When Susie came back to Hamilton Lane and saw her home on fire, the home her grandparents built, she saw her past and future burning.

“Someone reported hearing loud booms, so the fire department let the house burn. I wasn’t home so they just stood outside while it all burned. I dare them to find the 150-year-old teacup of my grandmother or the handmade bedspread,” Susie tells me as tears fall down her cheeks.

The small 1900’s home on Hamilton Lane is where her father was born and died two years ago.

“He was my world and my light I’m lost now.”

Susie had been living in Washington State but when her dad was ill, she came back to Brookings to spend time with him in the old family home. After he died, she stayed on and got more in touch with her family history and her own. “It’s not a house on Hamilton Lane—it’s the Hamilton House.”

All that’s left is half a house falling into disrepair. The home had been paid for many years ago, so the family had no insurance on it. She is not allowed to stay there. Having nowhere else to be and hoping to figure out how to fix it, Susie wanted to be near her home.

She was sleeping out in front of it when the neighbors complained she was squatting. “They didn’t like me because I let homeless people stay there before the fire. They were friends and I’d let them use the bedroom, or a couch, or the floor. Now this fire left me homeless.” She laughs with the irony and wipes her face with the back of her sweater. She is gathered outside the Seventh Day Adventist Church after a free, hot lunch with a small group.

At first, Susie thought she could get help to rebuild the house either with a loan or community support but it had never officially been transferred to her. “I lived there, it was my home. No one disputed it, but without the paper, you get caught in limbo.”

Susie sleeps in her car, bounces from couch to couch and sometimes sneaks into her old home to get out of the elements.

“I just keep going back and sifting through things, trying to find little treasures. I found photographs and a little shelf my dad made. I just really want to find the box of tea cups from my grandmother—there are 15 or 16 cups. These little things are all I have left of home.”

Despite going back almost daily to the house to figure out her history emotionally, mentally, and

physically, she is struggling to resolve it all. She's sought out counseling and assistance but says there are virtually no therapists left in Curry County.

"You can't even get in to see anyone. Doctors are leaving so fast that some clinics look open but there are no doctors except maybe once a week."

Susie worries if she doesn't do something fairly soon, she will fall into despair she can't get out of. As it is, she says she is depressed, drinking too much, and almost never sleeping or eating. "I can't find a place where I feel safe."

She is resigned to the fact that she can't stay at the house or even in Brookings. "There's nothing here for me. There's no job, and no support system. That ideal life in the small town my family is from—it died hard here. Maybe it's my dad's way of saying, 'go home, Susie.'"

Susie says since the fire, she's been getting in small fights and trouble with police officers. She admits to being distraught. It manifests in altercations, especially at the family home. "The police have forgotten the 'protect and serve part.'"

But, on this day, she has called them to help her. She left her cat with an acquaintance while she slept in her car and now she wants him back. The man is refusing to surrender the cat, so she's called the police. "I want my cat back. He's my friend. I'm getting gas money soon to drive home to Washington and stay with my mom and I need to take my cat with me."

Police arrive and calm the situation before any real fighting breaks out. The cat remains at the home and Susie leaves empty-handed. Yet another loss in her recent string of losses.

- A lack of transitional housing for people who suffer catastrophe creates homelessness
- Lack of doctors and therapists make it difficult to get mental health care
- A community policing model could include assistance as opposed to enforcement

Tracie Camp, 44, precariously housed, ten years

With two children, aged 5 and 7, Tracie says she has to be inventive to get by. They struggled after her husband's work in construction dried up and then he lost his job pumping gas. She's a home health care worker and even at two to three clients per day, the family chooses between necessities. Healthy food goes by the wayside more often than she would like.

"We don't need fancy box stuff, we need real food. If you're poor you get crappy food."

Living in Gold Beach, she's in a "food desert." There are only two grocery stores in town, and while their prices are comparable to each other, they tend to be higher than prices in higher-access areas that offer more food variety at lower prices, such as bigger communities with WinCo, Costco, Food Co-ops or other large employee-owned stores. The USDA puts it this way in a University of Illinois study:

“Thus, consumers living in food deserts face a smaller variety of groceries and a slightly higher food price index than consumers in census tracts with greater access to stores or consumers in census tracts with higher income.”

For Tracie, it plays out that to save money on food items she would have to use gas to drive to Brookings where stores are more available, but then she’s got to weigh the commute costs in hopes the food items she needs will be less expensive when she gets there. There is no promise that will pan out. She rarely takes that chance.

She is picking up a holiday box at the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

“It’s important to keep the kids as number one. They need to know how to survive. We stretch between food banks and food stamps. In that way, sometimes it’s easier to feed the family but harder to survive. You’re always in fear. Something is always in danger of being lost.”

Tracie and her family were homeless bouncing between places. “I’ve got a hole in my stomach from the stress, but nothing gets solved by hiding under a rock.”

She drove around looking for any empty houses. When she found a small home with no “for rent” or “for sale” sign, she looked up the owner’s information and contacted him. “We begged him to give us a chance. The house was just sitting. He hadn’t even considered renting it out until we called him. He came up and we rented it...thanks to Oregon Coast Community Action we got a small grant and moved in.”

Now she worries about keeping the electricity and water on. “We worry about keeping it.

We don’t do cable or any entertainment.”

Tracie and her family have lived in Gold Beach for ten years but never imagined it would get so much harder. With fewer rentals and higher costs she says the math doesn’t add up to having a home and food for your kids.

“When minimum wage gets raised, the cost of living goes up. You can never get on your feet.”

She says it took a lot of work and effort to find the help her family needed. “There needs to be somewhere people can go. We need to hold people’s hand and walk them through it.”

- Food deserts create difficulty accessing healthy food
- Owners of empty houses may be approached to assist
- Low wage earners choose between food, healthcare, electricity and rent
- Many people are unaware of any resources available

Matt's story, Age not stated, precariously housed for three years

Matt was hesitant to give his full name or even his age, but allowed me to take his photo for this report. A veteran suffering from PTSD and other issues as a result of trauma such as OCD, his primary concern is a lack of mental health counseling in Curry County. He says there are times when he considers taking his own life and has had substance abuse in his past. He frequently fears relapsing.

Matt has lived in Gold Beach for the past three years. He moved from the Bay Area in California, in hopes of reuniting with his estranged father and receiving support. But he says they “couldn’t make it work.”

He now lives in a trailer with no working bathroom or kitchen, and the water heater is broken. He cannot cook or clean up, yet he has to pay \$370 per month to stay in a broken trailer at a park where he can use the toilet but not the kitchen.

“It’s expensive here. It’s hard to eat and live. The food kitchen tries to help but it’s mostly old food and you’d have to have a place to cook it.”

Matt wants to get medical help and says he’s been trying to use VA benefits but at many places, they aren’t accepted. “It was \$187 for a co-pay.” He tries to get to Brookings for care but says, “You can’t rely on the bus.” Furthermore, Matt says he can’t find consistent medical care.

“There’s no mental healthcare. Doctors don’t stay. My one doctor, Jason Hays, was only here three months.”

Even if he can find a clinic with an available doctor, it normally involves going 27 miles down the highway.

Buses run three times daily and the last bus route ends at roughly 4:40 pm from Port Orford. They do not run on nights, weekends, or holidays. There is a roughly three-hour wait between buses. “You could never use a bus to get to and from work or anything like that. It’s okay for a doctor or so other appointment, if you only have one. If you’ve got multiple appointments, that’s not going to work.”

When asked how Matt works it out, he said he either gets rides or starts walking.

“You see all these people on the side of the highway on bikes or on foot—they’re people trying to get somewhere without a car. Out here in Curry County, it’s almost impossible without a car, and folks like me can’t afford one.”

- Substandard housing with no heat and running water is common
- Two prepared meals per week in Gold Beach makes regular meals difficult
- A lack of mental health providers leaves people without care

Selena Reisinger, 19, precariously housed most of her life

Selena couldn't stay with her parents any longer when her baby arrived. They lived in a small trailer with her four siblings, her two parents, and her partner.

"It's a 32-foot travel trailer. With that many people, there's no way we could make it work. So we had to find our own place," she says, while cradling her two-month-old daughter swaddled in a thick blanket at the food bank. "The food here helps stretch the budget. My boyfriend works construction but that's not been consistent."

They currently sleep in an old trailer until she can get back to work.

"I'll do anything. I can clean hotel rooms but they won't let me bring the baby to work so I need child care—that's not free."

Her only hope is either finding a way to take her baby to work. or finding low-cost childcare. Even staying in an old trailer and getting what free food they can, Selena says it's paycheck to paycheck. And getting a deposit together and finding a home for rent is out of reach.

"It sucks. It's really hard. I bought a twenty-dollar ornament for her first Christmas and it still haunts me. I didn't have that money but I wanted her to have something later so she could see how much we love her."

Every purchase has to be weighed. "I don't just go to the store I find every free, used or low-cost thing I can first. We don't pay for haircuts, we walk to save gas. He takes any job he can and if there's extra hours, he works more. I don't know how anyone is expected to live out here. Every month is a survival fight."

Selena and her family represent a large percentage of people in Curry County not counted as homeless but who live in unstable and largely untenable scenarios of limited heat, hot water, bathroom, and kitchen access. Subsidized housing has a minimum two-year wait, and the number of available rentals is further reduced by non-resident homeowners choosing Airbnb and vacation rental options for their income properties.

Couple that with the reality that Gold Beach and Port Orford have scant to no services. Two days per week there are hot lunches and one food bank attempts to meet the needs for Gold Beach. In Port Orford, there is one source for food and no drop-in options for clothing except for the Coast Clinic which has been advised recently that it's spending too much time working with the homeless, after a group of parents complained about unhoused people sheltering outside the clinic near a school.

In talking to local housed residents, it's clear many believe that the homeless are drug addicted or mentally ill and therefore not "safe" to be around or in association with. A campaign to change this perspective would seem a valuable foot in the door.

- Substandard, inadequate housing needs to be included in homeless portrait

- Vacation Rentals deeply affect the housing market
- Generalized lack of accessible services for food, clothing and medical care squeeze low income families

Elaine Clark, 73, homeless for six months

On the spectrum of living rough but under a failing roof, is 73-year-old Elaine Clark.

She's lived in Port Orford since 2000. A single woman with an undergraduate degree, she worked for the US Forest Service and eventually got a job as a lookout which provided housing.

"But when my dad got sick in California I went back to take care of him I stayed with him until he died. I couldn't really work and look after him. He left me no money so I had just enough to get a bus back to Oregon."

She took part-time caregiver jobs and was still getting by, using her bike, and living cheaply but another crisis occurred.

"I found a lump in my breast I wound up needing a mastectomy this past October, and I had to quit my job to take treatment. Now they don't want me back so I try to make it on Social Security."

She receives just over \$700 per month after Medicare is deducted.

"Anymore that's not enough. I wish to gosh I had a young son who could help me. But I've got no one."

She found what amounts to an abandoned building to live in and she's charged \$400 per month. "It's full of dry rot and mildew. I can't sleep because I have to fight off the rats all night. It's got no kitchen and I can't afford to heat it so the places where it leaks never dry out."

Elaine says she only goes there to sleep at night and goes elsewhere during the day to try and stay warm.

"It's depressing. It smells really bad and there's junk everywhere I'm only there to keep the rain directly off me."

In addition, the place has been broken into several times by people assuming it's abandoned. "They took my phone cards, postage stamps, and a little red grill I used for cooking. I've been ripped off so many times."

She is speaking to me at The Coast Clinic hoping for medical care. She is coughing a chest rattling hack.

"Everything is for rich people and it's getting scarier by the minute I'm not the only one in my shoes."

- Health outcomes are hampered by lack of access to safe, clean housing

- A lack of transitional income during medical crisis results in homelessness
- Predatory renting appears more common among Curry County landlords

Leo Granizo, 56, homeless for two years

Leo has lived in Brookings since 1995.

He used to be able to keep it together by working odd jobs, in construction, and as an auto mechanic.

But he says the cost of housing has gone up substantially and continues to climb. He blames out-of-area property buyers who snap up homes to create Cannabis grows.

“Cannabis is becoming a new form of slavery. They aren’t paying. They don’t let you stay and they don’t even let you bring your car.”

He currently lives in his van “The economy doesn’t make sense anymore. Everything got so expensive so you can’t pay rent,” he says while petting his dog Samantha.

“Rent used to be cheap, but now it’s impossible. You’re left on the outskirts of society.”

He is outside one of the lunch meals provided for the homeless and poor in Brookings. Lunches are served at different churches on Monday through Friday. He has a large bag with him to pick up any random recycling from the lunch. He does odd jobs and collects recycling to cover his gas of roughly \$75 per month.

“Feeding is good but it’d be better to have a job. I’d do anything to help- painting, clean up. Everyone would be happier if they could work for their food.”

Leo says he wishes there was a drop-in center where people could check a daily work board. “If you told me there was work, I’d go right now.”

Leo says he used to expect living wage work as a tradesman, but he says the area is so tapped out on jobs that at this point he’d work for any cash he could get on a daily basis so he could take care of himself. “I’d feel better being independent. I think everyone would.”

- A resource center offering a daily job board might offer opportunity
- Cannabis industries while providing some jobs may be contributing to a lack of rentals
- Programs which offer independence may attract greater support

John Tessore, 55, homeless for 18 months

Talking to John is watching a man lose his heart and mind in real time.

He begins his conversation saying that his car is broken down on Highway 101 near the “Welcome to Brookings” sign. He says he’s been living in the car with his dog Sebastian after losing his job as a gas station attendant.

Add to it the further loss of a home health care opportunity he banked on to avoid the situation he now finds himself in: homeless, hungry, and without resources.

John speaks coherently telling how he lived in a trailer park in an old RV, when he began to notice a pattern of discrimination. “I heard people complaining to the manager that I didn’t belong there, that I looked Mexican or Indian and shouldn’t be there.” After he complained about the racist slurs, he received an eviction notice.

“Fifteen minutes later they served me with an eviction notice. I had been there 6 years and always paid on time. They gave me 60 days to move out. The people who said racist things about me are still there, so far as I know.”

He then found the home health care opportunity but as he was scheduled to move in, a family member of the elderly man he was meant to help blocked the move. He says he doesn’t know why it happened but after they met face-to-face, the offer was withdrawn.

“I don’t remember anything bad happening He just called me and said no without an explanation.”

I meet John walking his seven miles to the nearest bathroom and showers. I offer him a ride and as he tells his story he has moments where his mouth opens as wide as his weathered face, and he is yelling without sound while tears fall down his face. He does this several times in a row and then speaks to himself in a mumble or whisper, “Calm down. It’s alright. Everyone isn’t bad.”

When John regains composure, he continues to describe his situation of trying to find day work and more jobs to get him through. He got a job chopping wood all day and earned 25 dollars for eight hours.

“I bought socks and underwear Pretty sure I didn’t make a fair amount, but it’s money and it helps.”

John is clear that he has never been a wealthy man but working for \$9.25 per hour and paying rent of just over \$300 made sense as an economy of scale. He had no savings nor backup plans; he couldn’t afford it. But he had never found himself homeless until now.

“I don’t know how to do this. I’m losing things, I can’t keep track. I lost my keys and I can’t find them. It’s day-to-day survival. Sometimes I do feel a sense of panic.”

Members of the community did assist John with getting his battery charged and others offered to hire a locksmith so he could move his car. He took some help, but not all help.

“I don’t want to leave my dog or my car People have offered to give me a hotel for a night or two but I’d come back and find my car gone. It’s all I have, that and Sebastian. I’ve got to pull myself out of this, I can’t have other people doing it for me.”

- Racism still contributes to homelessness
- The newly homeless experience deep, noticeable trauma
- Predatory hiring contributes to homelessness

Laura Wicks, 47, homeless for 2.5 years

As a housekeeper since she was old enough to work, Laura Wicks finds herself out of a job for the first time in her life.

“I was a housekeeper for 30 years. They have fewer people and just work them harder. That’s the trend now, that and hiring private contractors who have to have a car and go from one place to another. They don’t want to hire people anymore It’s cheaper that way and fewer rules.”

She had a place but was evicted when she couldn’t pay rent. It was \$700 per month. “It’s the cheapest you can find. There was nowhere else. I tried living in an old trailer, but the park said it was too old and they hauled it away.”

Laura says she’d move but she doesn’t have the money to go anywhere. I found her staying under an awning outside an abandoned restaurant.

“I want to work my way out of this. I don’t want charity. I’ve worked two jobs since I was twelve.”

She’s lived in Gold Beach for 18 years. Much of that time she spent bringing up a daughter who has disabilities. But when Laura lost the apartment the daughter left to go with her dad who has housing in Medford.

“I was glad she has a place to go. I don’t, really. You can’t pull yourself out here. They [the police] did a sweep in Gold Beach. A lot of people lost what they had. I was one of them. Many people just go to the next town, but I live here. I don’t know what I’ll do, but I can’t just float around.”

Laura is talking to me outside The wind is blowing hard, it rained earlier and she is walking with big bags of groceries the several miles from downtown to where she is staying across the river. She’s there because she fears being too close to businesses or the courthouse. She says that’s where you get tickets or picked up. Her cough is hard. She bends at the waist and it rattles through her.

“It’s bronchitis again I get it all the time staying out here It’ll go away eventually.”

She says she wants to work, wants to contribute, and hopes to be seen as a person with value again.

“I do what I can, pick up garbage around the beach and watch over people’s vacation homes even when no one asks. It’s good to be a good neighbor, even I don’t have a place to live right now, you know?”

- Temporary or so called “gig employees” are becoming a trend even in low wage, low promotion

industries

- Moving out of the community is not an option for some
- Lack of transportation affects the ability to work

Nicole McClean, 42, homeless for five year

“Once you go so far down, it’s hard to get back up. I’m staying in less than savory places. I’ve lost my ID, again.”

I meet Nicole at a community meal where she is eating off a small plate. She looks slightly out of place. It’s unclear if she is a volunteer or a person who needs assistance. I approach her and she smiles and offers me a seat. She is not shy about discussing her situation.

She says Gold Beach, in particular, is a difficult place to get on one’s feet.

“I was offered a place to stay at a trailer. I spent days cleaning everything out and getting it livable. I had people help me haul things away, garbage left around outside, and when I got it all done the woman who offered me the space changed her mind. She decided she could rent it for money. When I tried to argue with her she called the Sheriff’s Department and had me kicked out. After that I’ve been outside.”

Nicole says she could tell that story over and over, it’s happened so many times.

“There’s nowhere to stay They’ve bulldozed every place where a person can stay.”

In going to those places along the waterfront, the tread marks from bulldozers are still fresh. The vegetation is gone and there’s nowhere a person could sleep unseen.

Ultimately Nicole echoes the statements of many to whom I spoke on the coast:

“It gets into boundary issues when you’re homeless. People want to help, but once you accept help sometimes people forget to ask what you want or need. They begin piling on things you either cannot carry or making suggestions about things I’ve already tried that don’t work. I want my own job and my own place. The help is well intended, but when it doesn’t come by first seeing what’s needed, it’s almost a burden. The two things I want and need are a job and a place. Those things are not offered.”

Nicole stays in Gold Beach because her daughters are there. They stay with her mom where she is only occasionally welcome. “I don’t want to be the homeless mom in the way.”

She and her mom have a difference of opinion. Nicole’s mother wants her to enter programs and accept the help however she can get it. Nicole argues that the few existing services are not for her. “I tried Oasis. It wasn’t for me. It wound up being a waste of time for everyone.”

Nicole has taken help from her mom before but feels there are strings attached.

“I just want a very simple life. A small place I can afford and get around on foot I don’t need more I don’t need to fit in, I just need to survive.”

On this day they are having lunch together and attempting to reach across the divide but both describe being able to see eye to eye as unlikely. “This idea that family is an unbreakable bond where we always help each other—it’s not true,” says Nicole. Her mother nods her head in agreement. “The solution is not that simple. I feel like I fell down a well and someone took the rope.” Nicole’s mother briefly looks away, emotion strained her face.

Nicole tells me she would be better off if she had a clear disability or was a veteran. “There are no programs for a capable person who falls through the cracks.”

Nicole became homeless after returning from Italy where she had a restaurant with a man who abused her to the point of near death. She made it back to the Oregon shore with just the clothes on her back. She’d hoped to be bought out of the restaurant but staying to fight for that might have been the end of her.

“She was bruised and so thin she looked as if he was starving her. Whatever happened there broke Nicole,” her mother says. as Nicole looks off to an unseen distant place. Nicole’s mom says her daughter says she wants to die. Nicole disagrees.

“I want to live and to be okay like everyone else But there’s no hand up. They have jars all over town to help dogs but no jars for people.”

She says we as people have given up on each other She feels especially isolated.

“I’m alone I don’t know any other single women out here trying to survive like this.”

Across from her on this day of rice and veggies at a Seventh Day Adventist lunch, is a man who asks me if he can tell his story also.

- Programs for women tend to hyper focus around current domestic abuse
- A lack of transitional housing makes permanent housing less likely
- Family support systems wind up being strained to breaking

Vlavek, 72, homeless for four years

A retired school teacher originally from the San Francisco Bay Area, he moved to Portland on retirement to get into a more affordable environment He bought a home and went back to teaching He had no idea the 2008 collapse would come and hit him.

“I lost my home to foreclosure This is the fourth winter of living out of my car I’m 72, God Damn it. It gets harder.”

He only uses his last name. He is originally from Poland. He tells me his family fought Nazis and fascism. They came to America because they believed that could not happen here.

“They’re profiling people. If you’re sleeping during the morning legally they assume you’ve been there all night. They’re putting up signs at rest stops saying ‘four hours only.’ The Rangers do the same thing at Harris Beach.”

Vlavec says as an aging man it’s quite difficult to figure out how to sleep and care for himself with his additional needs.

“I’m a senior and I take all these meds. I need sleep at night and naps in the day. But no one wants to hear my story. They ticket you. If I had money for tickets I wouldn’t be sleeping in my car.”

Seven months ago illness claimed the life of Vlavec’s son, his only living relative. “What a cost for me personally,” he says while shaking his head. “I don’t want to believe it’s true, even now.”

He tells me he wanted to talk to me not so much for himself, as he expects he won’t be alive that much longer, but as a history teacher. He wants to convey a message which he hopes will appear on a printed page somewhere.

“I’ve seen a tremendous amount of morphing of attitudes around homelessness They’re ignoring the economic realities causing this. America is an empire, it’s controlled by a ruling class like a sovereign, but without a king or queen. People are not coming to terms with that. Until they do, this will be happening more.”

He says he runs into people with undergraduate and graduate degrees who have held high-level jobs and are now homeless.

“This couldn’t have happened to me even twenty years ago. With social security not indexed to inflation, with housing prices rising unchecked, I have to wonder, what do people expect to happen?”

He tugs his beard when I tell him he looks like a Russian writer. “Bazhov or some other similar one. Yeah, I get that a lot, or Gandalf. But I’m Gandalf The Grey. I’m not ready to be The White.” He smiles for the first time and his eyes shine.

“There’s nothing here on the coast but sky and water. That’s good in a way but bad in another. There is no help but an occasional meal once in a while. There’s no place we can gather, share information and create solutions as a community of people without housing. That’s a big problem. If people are allowed to, they often create some solutions. It may not be what those in authority want, but we’d come up with something. Even if it’s not being so lonely and isolated. I come here for the meal just to see people and remember I’m part of the species You can forget.”

- Isolation negatively impacts homeless individuals
- Public spaces where people could gather might lead to answers

- Four hour parking does not allow sleeping legally
- Poor attitudes toward the homeless are increasing

Jennifer Szira, 35, homeless for four months

Jennifer arrived in Gold Beach four months ago. She'd seen it before and fell in love with the coastline and the stillness of the nearby forests. She had been a counselor in Colorado and figured she could be part of a practice serving as a drug and alcohol counselor. She has her undergraduate degree in psychology.

"All they see is I'm homeless. They don't see anything else about me," she tells me at a community Christmas meal where she is sitting with her damaged knee in its bandage and her crutch nearby

"I dislocated my knee while walking around all night in the dark. I fell. I couldn't see anything but I couldn't go to sleep anywhere. It's excruciating."

She tells a story of limping into the hospital and having them bandage her knee. "The bandage and wrap is way too big. And I couldn't get any medicine. I told them I had fibromyalgia and a doctor there told me it's a made-up illness. He wouldn't give me anything for pain."

Jennifer is angry at one point and tearful at another. She says she is most often in disbelief at how quickly everything went wrong. She got off the bus hopeful and four months later, she describes herself as desperate.

"I have no car, no money, my health is deteriorating. All I have is a backpack and I worry it'll be stolen. I've found a secret place to sleep behind a dumpster. Isn't that glamorous? But if I don't keep that pack on, I figure someone will take it. I don't know how long it's been since I've taken a shower. Weeks."

She says she can't get anything together She's applied for any kind of job she hears about. She wants to stay in her field but says there are so few services for people that there's not even an office hiring. If she had money she'd open her own counseling service.

"I'd have to not be outside, with no money for food before I could start a practice," she says scoffing at her own dreams.

At one point, Jennifer went back to the hospital to say she is having suicidal ideation.

"I told them I'm thinking about killing myself all the time. I said I didn't want to, but keep thinking about it because it's so hard to be alive. I asked for help I hoped maybe they'd let me sleep there, get a shower, help with the pain and I could go on. But they did nothing They looked at me like a scammer. They literally told me I'd be fine and sent me out of the hospital I think it amounts to malpractice, I really do."

She says the Gold Beach police have told her numerous times she has to leave. Jennifer says they tell her

to go to Brookings.

“They didn’t offer a ride or bus ticket. I guess they figure I should limp my way there. I asked everybody, the police, DHS, and churches to help me. No one did anything. It’s shameful how people are treated here.”

Jennifer says she is trying to get to Crescent City and she’s been told by churches there they will give her a bus ticket back to Colorado.

“I’m hanging on for that. Crescent City and home. I’ll never come back here. I want to put it behind me I’ve never seen the kind of problems they have here there’s nothing for you They leave you in the street.”

- Lack of mental health jobs affects providers and patients
- Hospital workers lack training in working with homeless people
- Lack of options forces people out of the community

The Helpers: Beth Barker-Hidalgo

Because Curry County has virtually no governmental programs and few non-profits dedicated to assisting the homeless, we wanted to speak to the grassroots individuals who lend aid. They, too, appear to suffer with their clients as it’s so difficult to cobble together real help.

These are their stories:

Beth Barker-Hidalgo heads the Curry County Homeless Task Force. “We need to recognize homeless people as human We need to bring them into the solutions,” Beth tells me over coffee at Rachael’s coffee shop. It’s one of the places where people without shelter can come to read in the bookstore or drink something warm. “The cities and county have this feeling if we build resources here more homeless will come. They fail to see they are already here.”

Beth’s frustration is palpable but not discouraging her from continuing to create opportunities for the homeless. Her approach right now is to create infrastructure through assisting the community in understanding the plight of the homeless. And then establishing a triage system so that the first contact with a homeless person, which is often law enforcement, turns to aiding homeless people rather than punishing them. “We need trained volunteers and professionals whom the police or hospital can call so we can step in and offer help.”

Beth and her team are the people tasked with the Point in Time Count and she is also working to create a better system of data collection from emergency responders. It’s so they can get a truer picture of how many homeless people come in contact with them due to emergencies.

Her organization is one of three entities working county wide to deliver services. Her goal is to create

emergency shelter and drop-in services for the homeless and marginalized while creating understanding among agencies about the needs of the unsheltered. There is a building in Gold Beach across from the Curry County Courthouse on 5th Street which remains empty. “We could create transitional housing. There’s space for kitchens, bathrooms, laundry facilities and lockers. If you used the upstairs there could be short and long term housing.”

Funding has additionally been granted to build an additional bus stop in Gold Beach. Currently, the bus does not stop there, making transportation, which is already difficult, even more problematic. She pushed for a bus stop to assist the community. “We just want a bus stop The money is there The city hasn’t sent a plan over for a bus enclosure We’re still waiting. This is what happens, and we wind up giving money back.”

She says there are so many examples of opportunities to help the homeless but officials would rather forego the money because they don’t want to make life easier for those unsheltered. They would rather, says Beth, see folks leave the area. “We need to listen, hear, and recognize the people who need our help. They’re here, they’ve been here for a long time The judgment has got to stop.”

- Triage system for notifying helpers
- Better transportation
- Create shelter and drop in center

Jim Johnson, Beyond Rejection Ministries

Jim is kneeling in a small field where mushrooms grow wild and homeless folks harvest them for sale to local brokers. “This is one of the ways people can make a little money. It’s nothing anyone can live on and they aren’t paid the true value of their work.”

Entering Jim’s antique store in the old library, you immediately see tables stacked with dry goods, socks, blankets and water bottles. He offers emergency food, blankets and a listening ear to the unsheltered in Curry County. A tireless advocate, Jim finds himself often sweeping in a dust storm offering small comforts but not able to quell the storm. “People don’t understand how many people are in need. I bring them here and do what I can for them I can fill their hearts and bellies, I can refuse to give up on them and sometimes get them longer term help, but I can’t do the one thing they need most—I can’t get them a safe place to stay.”

Jim has been running his ministry mostly on his own from his antique shop. He has a history as a helper, at one time running one of the nation’s first and largest hospice centers for people with AIDS in Southern California. “I knew someone had to help, so I did it. I got a lot of support as one of the first to do it. But this homelessness issue seems to be harder. The judgment is even harsher.”

Jim says despite his efforts, there are no real resources for people who need a place to stay. He is also

hoping for a shelter on 5th Street but fears the County Commissioners aren't open to solutions such as transitional housing or shelters, because the will is not there. "They can't agree to help. The history is long here of driving the homeless out of the community. There are stories of homeless people being picked up, threatened and dropped in Coos Bay and told not to return."

He's concerned that a lack of medical care agencies and mental health facilities as well as basic physical care makes homeless people more traumatized and harder to treat. That re-enforces stereotypes. "They don't get help and then they appear worse. That allows the community to categorize them negatively."

Walking through town with Jim is enlightening, as he waves at the unsheltered and stops for hugs every few minutes. He has success stories of people he befriended and was able to talk a business owner into hiring. But he has more stories of people who still need a hand. He walks me around the 5th Street facility and begins dreaming of things like industrial washers and dryers, showers and daily warm meals and shuttle service. "Can you see it?"

- Judgement makes helping difficult
- A shelter would ease suffering
- Lack of resources makes trauma grow larger and deeper

Curry Coast Clinic

The clinic in Port Orford has been a staple in assisting the homeless in a community with the least amount of resources offering only one clinic and one food bank.

The photo above captures one of the biggest dilemmas described for the unsheltered in Port Orford. Cottages that used to be available for residents at a reasonable rental price have been converted to Bed and Breakfast or Airbnbs.

With few rentals available at any price, residents find themselves staying long-term in motels and using up the money they might have had to move into permanent housing. At the Coast Clinic workers found themselves dealing with the fallout by referring people who drop in for help. They often use what funding they have with flexibility for bus tickets to places with more availability or for overnight stays. They offer what food or clothing they can as a clinic. Recently that activity has had to be curtailed as a result of their parent organization suggesting they are spending too many resources on the homeless. This comes as a result of the unsheltered sleeping under an awning.

Without the clinic to assist the unsheltered in Port Orford there will be no agency or support.

Summary:

Curry County singularly relies on private aid through church organizations and private donations to assist the homeless in the area. There are no temporary or permanent shelters, no county-wide regular meals,

and few if any, resources for clothing, showers, laundry, or other basic needs.

Additionally, there is no regular transportation between communities for work, doctor appointments, or services.

Medical clinics and doctors struggle to keep practices open and stabilized, creating greater trauma for those who are disproportionately affected by chronic illness and mental health issues directly resulting from living unsheltered. Services for veterans, a sizable population in Curry County, have diminished, leaving many homeless vets without providers.

Recommendations from the homeless and the helpers include: a need for emergency services such as shelter, regular food, clothing, and hygiene; education for the community about the causes of homelessness; and stable medical care.

Conclusions from the author

“There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.” —Desmond Tutu

The work I have been doing in preparing this report has been that of watching person after person fall in the river and drown. I have observed it, I have heard their whispers and last breaths, as they disappear under the waves of our culture. I have shared this with you.

If we are to discover why people are falling in the river we will need the courage to examine our systems which reward some and punish others. We will need to look at systemic racism, ageism, sexism and how winners and losers are determined. We know from all of our collected research that when you start from behind it is much more difficult to catch up. This has not been truer in this country since the Great Depression.

We also know the wage gap and income inequality has risen to the point of being unsolvable in the individual lives of millions of Americans. When a person can work 40 hours per week at minimum wage and not be able to afford a roof over their heads, it’s clear that minimum wage is sub minimum. This is but one example.

This leaves state and local governments, agencies and private companies to fill in a gap which the federal government is unwilling to fill. The awareness of this reality has not yet been widely accepted by state and local communities. While nonprofit organizations and some for-profit companies attempt to fill this gap, it cannot, in this reporter's opinion, be done this way alone. We can pull folks out of the river, but to stop them from falling in we will need robust and lasting solutions on a federal, state, and local level. We will need to acknowledge that “they” are “us.”

Meantime, right now, there are an estimated 20,000 children in Oregon sleeping in cars and substandard housing cued up to be the next generation of homeless people.

Lacking proper nutrition and educational opportunities as well as the benefit of appropriate socialization, these children are likely to struggle throughout their lifetimes.

What does their future, and our collective future look like?

The answers are derived from the current reality. Unless systemic solutions are created to systemic problems, what we witness today we will witness tomorrow, but in higher numbers with worsening outcomes for individuals and communities. It is a bleak future absent a serious and prolonged course correction.

It is not a question of money—we know that Housing First saves money in terms of services and healthcare. The problem is fundamentally a lack of understanding due to a process of dehumanizing the poor, homeless and marginalized. It's been my hope this work may assist in bringing names, faces and stories to our neighbors without a home.

While we work for systemic change we can as individuals and groups continue pulling people out of the river. We must. There is no morality in letting people drown when lifelines exist. We can, and, I believe, we must offer hope which today is in such short supply.

While doing this work I became inspired to start a non-profit offering long term tiny housing to homeless children and families by converting school buses into fully functioning homes. This is currently underway. Additionally, this inspiration moved into creating sleep buses so that homeless individuals can have a safe, warm place to sleep at night—now. These buses will provide more than 5,000 safe sleeps annually.

This brings hope. For me. For those living unsheltered.

This report started everything. Understanding makes all the difference.

I am grateful for the opportunity

Gratitude

I express gratitude to the hundreds of people who contributed to my understanding of homelessness and allowed me to capture their stories for this report.

Thanks also go out to the staff and volunteers who are daily working to assist the unhoused in their struggle to survive.

And my appreciation is also present to policymakers who continue to educate themselves on how to solve homelessness and who believe that, indeed, it can be solved.

Finally, I thank AllCare Health for its relentless belief in caring for people and for enabling me to compile this report.

Julie Akins, Senior Housing Director, AllCare Health



Brianna, Bryan, Kendalyn and Skyler, homeless for two weeks



Chastity, 35, homeless for five months



Christine Hardy, 67



Curry Coast Clinic



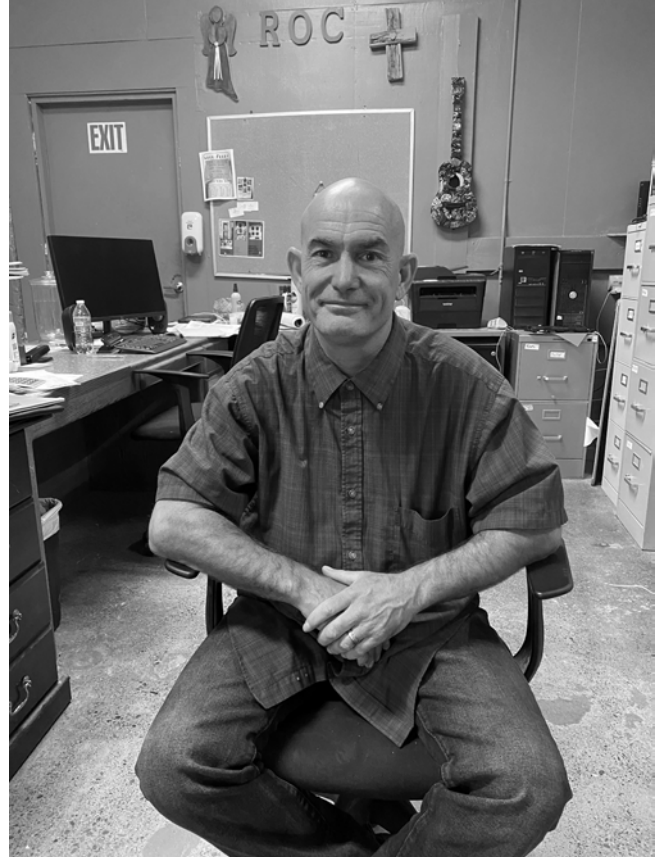
Danica Beamer , 36, homeless for one day



Debra, 58, homeless 5 years. Daughter 35, homeless, 5 years



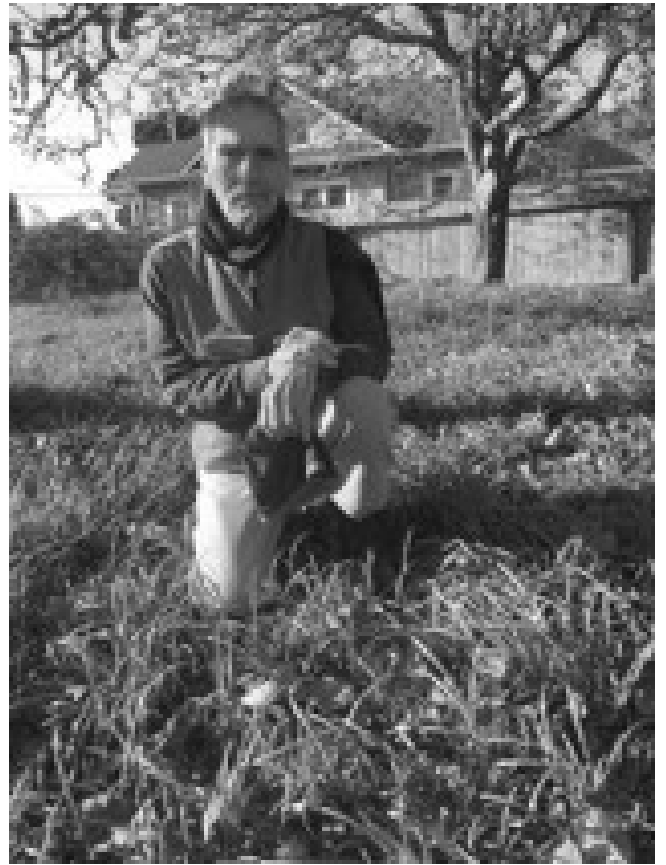
Elaine Clark, 73



James, 47, homeless non continuous five years



Jennifer Szira, 35



Jim Johnson, Beyond Rejection Ministries



John Thiry



Leo Granizo, 56



Marcelle, 61



Mark, 27



Matt



Megan, 26, homeless for three weeks



Melodie, 74



Michelle Viera, 54



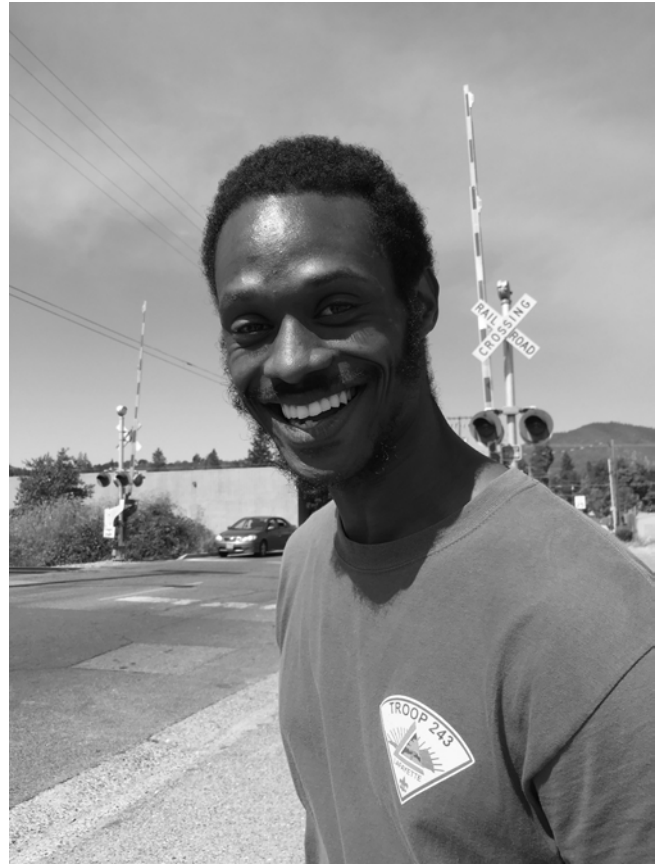
Nicole McClean, 42



Notice



Randy, 63



Shelton, 36, homeless noncontinuously since 12 years old



Susie Hamilton, 50



Tracie Camp, 44



Beth Barker-Hidalgo, Curry County
Homeless Task Force



Vlavek, 72



Laura Wicks, 47



John Tessore, 55



Selena Reisinger, 19



Freddie Romero, 35



Miriam, 42, homeless for 18 months



Steve, 50, homeless for 38 months



David Deans, 65, homeless for one year



Colleen Bannon, 70, homeless for 3 years



Audrey Graham, 36



Johnny Miller, 55



Sean Hart Wick, 47



Reatha Kershner, 70



Dale Townsend, 54.

