

I've been doing grassroots, volunteer outreach on the streets of Portland for about 6 years. I've distributed countless meals, pairs of socks, tarps, tents, items of clothing, first aid supplies, etc. On nearly every occasion of outreach, I hear from folks that their belongings have been confiscated by Rapid Response, Clean & Safe or other 'cleaning' teams. Lost are sleeping bags and other life saving supplies, medications and personal mementos. What do I see when I drive around Portland now? Abandoned sites - presumably where camps have been 'cleaned' and people have been pushed along. But oddly... very little cleaning. It's become obvious to me that the primary purpose of these companies is to move people along, disrupt them and in turn, make it impossible for them to find stable footing. As someone who has resources to support folks outside, it's a game of cat and mouse attempting to track down someone who I may have met on the street just a few days before, because they've been swept. How are people supposed to take steps to improve their lives if they are spending their life moving from spot to spot, losing all their belongings and essentially being told they are welcome NOWHERE? Outside of the pure lack of humanity associated with this system, it's ineffective to get us to the result we all want as a collective - to get people off the streets. Let's take the funding that we're using to sweep people from place to place and convert that towards creating community programming, outreach teams, true transitional housing (not just 'low income' that many cannot afford) mental health treatment programs (drug, other mental health and treatment for the trauma incurred pre-homelessness and during homelessness). We have to innovate and get out of this thinking that we can somehow find a resolution to this inhumanity by pushing people around and giving them criminal records. I once worked with a fellow in my neighborhood to get housing. He was a vet so he was lucky to be able to get a social worker. It took him a year to get a place and it happened because he was in my neighborhood. I could find him and communicate messages to him from his support network. There were many barriers. I don't even try to do this with anyone who is not only swept regularly but who is exhausted from lack of sleep, who has to find a new place to put themselves each day (IMAGINE THAT), who has a criminal record for sleeping in the wrong place, who has lost their identification and personal materials due to sweeps, etc. If we could build neighborhood coalitions to support the people in our neighborhoods with resources and connection points and we had places for them to be to receive resources (more so than the handful of nonprofits who are overwhelmed), we could make some headway. No one wants to see people and their belongings strewn all over our city. No one. But we have to acknowledge that when we provide so few resources and options, we have to accept much of the blame. These are people. Many have been through extreme trauma on the streets. If they can find a place where they feel safe we should encourage them to stay in that spot. If someone has a vehicle or an RV, all that happens when it's towed and taken is they are in a tent the next night (at best). It doesn't solve anything. Where is our humanity? I believe it's still in all of us. Let's think bigger and bolder. And first, we need to protect our most vulnerable. Thank you.