

Portland assesses health of street people

by Stephen Beaven, The Oregonian

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On a chilly fall night, three outreach workers pull up behind a two-tone van parked on a quiet side street in Southeast Portland. After a polite knock, two women, a man and a friendly pit bull climb out onto the sidewalk and the survey begins.

The workers asked: Where do you go to the hospital when you're sick? Have you ever been taken to the hospital against your will? Are you an IV drug user?

Monica Heusel answers questions about her health history from volunteer Steve Mattsson on Southeast 22nd Avenue near Powell Boulevard as part of a citywide survey of homeless people conducted this week. The data have been analyzed to determine the most medically vulnerable people living on Portland's streets.



They log the responses, photograph the man and the women and hand out \$5 gift cards from Burger King and Safeway.

The survey this week was part of a massive three-day study to identify the most medically vulnerable people living on Portland's streets. The results released Friday showed that of the 646 people surveyed, 302 reported having at least one serious health problem that could lead to premature death.

"They are our priority," said City Commissioner Nick Fish. "They could literally die on the street."

Fish said he has given the Bureau of Housing and Community Development 10 days to come up with a plan to address their needs. The city also has set aside 50 winter shelter beds for the people with the most pressing health problems, said Sally Erickson, who oversees the city's 10-year plan to end homelessness.



Volunteers Quinn Colling (sitting) and Steve Mattsson talk to two homeless men late Wednesday on Southeast First Avenue. Adam Hinkle (standing) said he appreciated the health survey: "Guys are actually coming out and talking to us. That's how you get to know people (and) find out what's really going on."

But Fish said he doesn't know if the city will use the priority list created from the study to place the most vulnerable people in permanent housing ahead of others who have been on waiting lists.

This is part of the complex moral question that social service agencies and city officials will tangle with in the coming months: How do advocates for homeless people decide who gets access to limited resources? The question becomes even tougher to answer in a tight rental market, especially if the city can't expand its supply of low-income housing in the middle of a faltering economy. But some solutions are on the table.

There are 70 federal housing vouchers available for homeless veterans, with 70 more coming next year. Multnomah County and the city also are considering spending \$200,000 each to fund two warming centers at public buildings this winter for people to come inside for 12 hours.

The findings

Social service workers and volunteers surveyed 646 homeless people this week in Portland to find out who had the most serious health problems. Many of those surveyed had more than one of the eight risk factors used to evaluate medical vulnerability.

- Tri-morbid: **231** (People with a chronic medical condition, substance abuse and psychiatric problems at the same time)
- More than three hospital or ER admissions in the past year: **218**
- More than three ER visits in past three months: **275**
- Older than 60: **19**
- HIV/AIDS: **20**
- Cirrhosis or end-stage liver disease: **72**
- End-stage renal disease or dialysis: **29**
- History of frostbite or hypothermia: **91**

Source: City of Portland

The flurry of activity comes after city officials began studying the work of a New York nonprofit called Common Ground, which uses an identical "vulnerability index" based on a number of health conditions that lead to death on the street.

Representatives from Common Ground were in Portland this week to help the city, the county and nearly 70 volunteers gather and analyze data collected on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

Thirteen teams of volunteers hit various parts of the city to administer 45-question surveys to people living on the streets. The health information was entered into a database and used to determine who has health problems that require immediate attention.

The three outreach workers who went out late Wednesday night, for example, administered about 10 surveys. They talked to a range of people, from raucous twentysomethings to a 64-year-old man with a long white beard and a long history of sleeping on the street.

The van parked on Southeast 22nd Avenue near Powell Boulevard included a married couple and their friend.

They all answered the questions without hesitation, even the deeply personal queries including: Have you been diagnosed with HIV or AIDS and have you ever been to prison?

"This is a good thing," said Jennifer Patraw, a 27-year-old who's been living in the van and has been homeless off and on for 13 years. "There's people out here that have medical problems. And there are a lot of people and places who care."

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