

[Login / Create Account](#)

NEWS » CITY

October 30, 2008

# Death's Door Key

## City Surveys the Health of the Homeless

by [Matt Davis](#)

**"I'VE HAD TWO HEART ATTACKS** this year. I'm in alcoholic withdrawal. I have seizures, I have hypertension, I'm on about 12 different medications. I shouldn't even be smoking right now, to tell you the truth," said Lewis Goescht, smoking a cigarette outside the Portland Rescue Mission on W Burnside. It's just before dawn on Wednesday, October 22.

Goescht was one of 646 homeless people surveyed about their health over three days last week, by a team of nearly 70 volunteers working in collaboration with the city's Bureau of Housing and Community Development (BHCD) and the

ARTICLE TOOLS

[email a friend](#)[print](#)[share](#)[save this story](#)[add to custom list](#)

New York-based nonprofit Common Ground. Common Ground has a new "Vulnerability Index" survey, which is being conducted in six cities across the country, including Portland.

The Vulnerability Index relies on research by a Boston organization identifying seven medical indicators like HIV, cirrhosis, and kidney disease that cause afflicted homeless people to have a 40 percent chance of dying over the next seven years.

Later last Wednesday, Common Ground's Director of Innovation Becky Kanis showed the *Mercury* a photograph of 11 homeless people taken in New York in 2000. Each of them has one of the seven medical indicators. "Only three are still alive," she said.

The city's new housing commissioner, Nick Fish, told an audience at the Portland Building last Friday, October 24, that he was proud of the survey, "even as I am troubled by what we have learned. Frankly the results shock me."

Portland's homeless population is markedly sicker than the others surveyed so far by Common Ground. Of the 646 homeless people surveyed in 13 sectors close to the city's downtown core, 47 percent had one of the seven dangerous conditions, compared to an average of 42 percent among the other cities surveyed. Most significantly, Portland's rate of tri-morbidity—where a person has co-occurring psychiatric, substance abuse, and chronic medical conditions—is 36 percent, compared to an average of 22 percent in the other cities surveyed.

Liora Berry of BHCD suggested the federal slashing of the Oregon Health Plan—132,000 poor Oregonians were insured on the plan in 1995, and just 19,000 are now—could be partly to blame. Sixty-three percent of those surveyed were uninsured. The survey also uncovered 45 medically vulnerable veterans, and 23 people under 25 with injection drug habits, daily alcohol use, or HIV infection—significant risk factors for morbidity among homeless youth.

The worst case surveyed was a 63-year-old Hispanic woman who has been on the streets 10 years, with liver disease, kidney disease, heart problems, a history of frostbite, who had been the victim of violent attacks since becoming homeless, and who has no income or health insurance.

Commissioner Fish responded to the data by asking BHCD Homeless Program Manager Sally Erickson to come up with "a plan" by next Monday, November 3. Fish says he'll also work with the county to consider opening two new warming centers in the winter months, for \$200,000 each. Erickson has already set aside 50 winter shelter beds for people with the most pressing health problems, and plans to use 70 veterans' vouchers from the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development to target the vulnerable veterans.

But with no extra federal funding on the immediate horizon, the impact of the survey on the city's housing policy is potentially much further reaching, controversially changing the way people get to the top of housing waiting lists, for example.

Goescht, who is on the city's list for housing at a nearby shelter, was at first reluctant to fill out a survey. But volunteers explained that his answers could help his chances of getting into housing sooner, so he changed his mind. When he was done, the volunteers took his picture, and handed over a \$5 Safeway card for his time.

Nevertheless, Erickson is resolute about the imperative implicit in the data.

"At the moment, people are getting housed because they are able to elbow themselves to the front of the line," Erickson told the *Mercury*. "We're going to ask the question borne out of the Vulnerability Index, which is how we become smarter with our resources so we can save some lives."

[more articles in News »](#)

Tags: [city hall](#), [Nick Fish](#), [homelessness](#), [housing](#)



### COMMENTS (0)

[Add a comment](#)

Your comments

[Preview Comment](#)



**gentian**

in the summer, i spend a lot of time outside when i am not working....

**Browse...**[Girls seeking Boys](#)[Girls seeking Girls](#)[Boys seeking Girls](#)[Boys seeking Boys](#)**From the Archives****Pins and Needles**

As super pure heroin doubles Portland's overdoses, some addicts swap syringes for acupuncture pins.

by Sarah Mirk

---

**Work Ethic**

Anti-immigration protesters up the ante at Portland's day-labor site.

by Sarah Mirk

---

[More»](#)

**Author Archives****Palin Abused Power As Governor**

by Matt Davis

---

**Overdue for Delivery**

Police chief promises racial profiling plan by mid-October.

by Matt Davis

---

[More»](#)

**Recommended Events****The Portland Mercury's Election Night Obama Night  
@ Doug Fir**

Tue., Nov. 4, 5 p.m.

**Comments (0)**

**Most Commented On****Fare Warning**

Cabbies allege there's a "racket" involving hotel bellhops and town-car drivers.

by Matt Davis

---

**The Wrong Guy**

First, Clifton Brooks is assaulted by two strangers. Then, he's Tasered by the cops. Tough day.

by Matt Davis

### Top Viewed Stories

#### [Jumped](#)

Was an Innocent Man Beaten and Tasered by Cops?

by Matt Davis

#### [Kidnapped](#)

Author Marjorie Skinner asked a stranger for the opportunity to be tied up and kidnapped. You should always be careful what you wish for...

#### AD OF THE WEEK



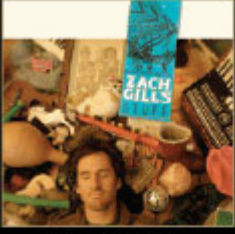
**Exile Art and Design for Bands**  
*Exile is a full service design house aimed at helping bands achieve cutting edge art on a small budget. We excel at creating unique catchy art inspired by the bands ideas/music.*

#### Bands Page

Housing	Jobs
Musicians	For Sale
Wheels	Services
Health	The Arts
Friends 'N' Neighbors	
Bulletin Board	
Personals	Adult

**POST AN AD**

**Brushfire Records**




**\$11.99 CD**

**ZACH GILL'S STUFF**  
 FEATURES "FAMILY" AND "BEAUTIFUL REASON"

**Live @ Wonder  
 Ballroom Sunday  
 Nov 9th**

**\$11.99 CD**



**MASON JENNINGS IN THE EVER**  
 FEATURES "FIGHTER GIRL" AND "YOUR NEW MAN"

**Free EP with purchase**  
(while supplies last)

after good thru 11/12/08

**MUSIC MILLENNIUM**

**CLINTON STREET**  
*Theater*  
**AND BREWPUB**

2522 SE CLINTON ST  
503-238-8899  
[clintonstheater.com](http://clintonstheater.com)



# POP IN!

**Arthouse**  
**Foreign**  
**Cult Classics**  
**Gay & Lesbian**  
**Documentaries**  
**Asian Cult**  
**The Latest**  
**Chart Busters**

## **VIDEORAMA**

**ALL RENTALS-5 DAYS**

**2310 N Lombard**  
**503-289-8408**

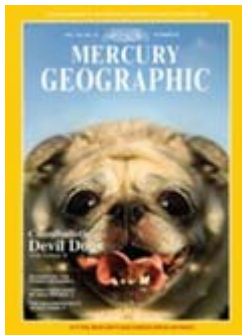
**1136 NW Lovejoy**  
**503-796-2825**

**1990 SE Ladd**  
**503-231-1181**

**7522 N Lombard**  
**503-247-3433**

**2640 NE Alberta**  
**503-288-4067**

### ABOUT PORTLAND MERCURY



- [Archives](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Masthead](#)
- [Advertiser Directory](#)
- [Ad Info & Rates](#)

### CLASSIFIEDS »

- [Housing](#)
- [Roommates](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Musicians](#)
- [For Sale](#)
- [Wheels](#)
- [Services](#)
- [Health](#)
- [The Arts](#)
- [Friends 'n' Neighbors](#)
- [Escorts](#)
- [Personals](#)
- [Bands](#)



**GOING TO SEATTLE?**



- Features
- News
- Food & Drink
- Music
- Film
- Visual Art
- Theater
- Books
- Slog
- Line Out

[Home](#) [Articles & Archives](#) [News](#) [Restaurant Search](#)

[Savage Love](#) [Food & Drink](#) [Music](#) [Film](#) [Visual Art](#) [Theater](#) [Books](#) [Blogtown, PDX](#) [End Hits](#)

[M.O.D.: Mercury on Design](#) [Performance Events](#) [Movie Times](#) [Classifieds](#) [Personals](#) [Bands Page](#)

All contents © Index Newspapers, LLC

605 NE 21st Ave

Portland, OR 97232

[Contact Info](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Production Guidelines](#)