

The Oregonian

Could consistent outreach impact most entrenched homeless camps? City says yes.

*By Molly Harbarger
November 3, 2019*

Aaron Burbank had wanted to get out of rain and dropping temperatures for weeks. But his partner was reluctant.

While Tiffany Heick's walker makes getting around muddy campsites more difficult, she also doesn't like being confined in a shelter.

Ieisha Bolian, who leads the new city-county Navigation Team, had been talking with them for two weeks and knew their story. So when Heick agreed to leave their tent complex along the bike path at Southeast 92nd Avenue and Flavel Street, Bolian recognized it was a big moment.

"It's just hard out here to live out here," Burbank said.

Bolian has been doing outreach work for years, but has only recently started seeing this kind of change of heart happen more frequently. It's why she believes in a new approach to homeless camp clean-ups: Spending time to create relationships, trust and finding out what people really need.

Far from city services downtown, that stretch of Southeast Portland has one of the largest groups of homeless campers in the city. As such, it also attracts attention from people who live in houses nearby and complain of trash, needles and the regular parade of people looking for a place to stay.

Crews clean the area, but often campers are back within days and crews must return to post warnings for follow-up cleanings. The churn has done little to assuage the concerns of neighbors who regularly file complaints to the city's One Point of Contact system. The process has also done little to discourage people from camping under the bridges, in the gulleys and along the bike-pedestrian paths that make up this pocket of land where Johnson Creek, Springwater Corridor, MAX and bus lines all intersect.

This spring, a new team launched with the task of making a dent in these high-traffic, high-risk areas. The team of community health workers from Central City Concern and outreach and housing specialists from Transition Projects comb the campsites along the most entrenched corridors to talk to every person who lives there and offer water, a warm place to sleep for the night or -- at best -- a permanent home.

The team is supposed to be the best of all solutions -- a concerted effort to connect people with services before crews come along and disrupt their lives and belongings. Once the team finishes and an area has been cleared out, the city installs fencing to keep people from camping there in the future. It's a combination of the carrot and a stick to relieve what officials say is a drain on resources.

It will likely take time to see whether people who request and receive services through the team return to the street, but officials say they've found success so far with dozens of people sent to shelters and more than 100 signed up for housing waitlists. Even more have been provided with identification cards, and were signed up for insurance or other immediate needs.

Officials attribute the gains to consistency. Heick said she was last in housing about three years ago and had been interested in getting on the waitlists she'd been hearing about. She'd occasionally been approached by outreach workers while she camped, but rarely. And when she did, she said she'd never heard from them again.

So when the navigation team said they could call a cab for a ride to the shelter and could help the couple fill out the waitlist form, Heick was happy to take the 15 minutes while rain pelted the top of her tent.

"I haven't known who to talk to about that," Heick said.

The hardest camps to clean

The navigation team has worked at more than six sites since it began at the beginning of the year.

Some are long hauls like the 92nd and Flavel area, where the team was able to visit five days a week for several weeks and provide a range of services before the area was cleared. Other sites are more short-term: They had to bring in additional workers to help clear an Oregon Department of Transportation property in only two weeks.

All mitigation of camping in the city is controversial, with many advocates saying that while outreach for services is fine, the goal to clear areas at the end is the problem. The new approach runs into some of the same problems: Navigation team members found some people who were displaced from the transportation department's property farther south down Interstate 205 when they started work on that site.

Each week, the team gathers around a conference table at the Joint Office of Homeless Services to look at maps of where they're working. They discuss how many interactions they had and how they went. They talk about campers by name, especially when they have been at one site for a few weeks.

And they discuss how long it might take to accomplish their goal. For 92nd and Flavel, they were skeptical at the beginning of October the area would be able to be cordoned off any time soon: Too many people were there and they were camped out in hard-to-find spots.

Clean-up locations are based on a rubric of need determined by the city's One Point of Contact complaint system. Whenever someone files a complaint about a tent or RV, the Homelessness and Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program sends out a crew to evaluate.

Crews score sites based on whether there are signs of needles used for drugs on the ground, if trash or tarps take up several yards worth of ground and other factors. Some complaints are dismissed if the campsite is orderly and low-key.

But some rank so high on the scale – and so often -- that they're nearly always in the process of being cleaned or prepared for cleaning.

Two years ago, the mayor's office allocated money for a team that would work those areas to make it possible to close them off. So far, the employees and services offered have cost about \$415,000.

Instead of evicting campers and then erecting fencing to keep people out -- as many private landowners do -- the navigation team would help move campers elsewhere, ideally somewhere with less impact. Then they'd put up barriers so they can't return.

"I believe in using a 'whatever it takes' approach to help people, and this program builds on our work bringing services directly to people in need, instead of making them come to us," said Mayor Ted Wheeler. "By focusing this team on high-impact campsites where they can engage on

a near-daily basis, we can help break the cycle of homelessness for people who are camping as well as end the cycle of cleanups that come with that camping.”

A strategy that works

The navigation team is similar to a strategy used in Seattle and San Francisco.

There, the teams work more closely with law enforcement, or police do the work themselves. People camping in those cities are directed to shelters or a center that provides a bed and services.

In Portland, the team is independent of police, though its members work closely with the Portland Police Bureau.

The bureau’s neighborhood response teams and city park rangers point the outreach workers to where campers are located and give background about past interactions. From there, the five-member team canvasses the area for a week, introducing themselves and getting to know where people camp and who they are.

They can deploy a mobile hygiene unit – a trailer with two toilets, eight lockers and a box for used syringes. At 92nd and Flavel, it’s well used, but the navigation team members try to make sure it doesn’t attract people to camp beside it.

As they build rapport, they do vulnerability assessments -- a log of what someone’s needs and barriers are. They use the information to place people on housing waitlists. The team can also help people obtain birth certificates, identification cards or employment assistance.

The community health workers can also sign anyone up for the Oregon Health Plan and greatly reduce the time it takes for someone to go from the street to a local detox center -- from a couple weeks to sometimes the next day.

The amount of time it takes between when someone says they want help to when they get it matters, said Dave O’Neil, a team member from Central City Concern. Especially when they could pack up and move to another campsite in that period.

When he started with the team, he expected it would take a lot of time to cajole people into a recovery program. But after at least 11 people agreed to go to the Hooper Detox Stabilization Center in North Portland from two different camp sites, he’s glad he can eliminate that lag time when they are ready to go that day.

Establishing trust

The bulk of what the team can offer, though, is a way out of the rain that night.

Huddled under an umbrella to use her phone, Transition Projects’ outreach program manager Daphne Nesbitt said that as weather has worsened, more people accept a shelter spot. However, she said, they might not have opted for that if they didn’t recognize and trust the navigation team crew.

“A lot of the folks who are chronically homeless and out here have been let down in the past,” Nesbitt said.

That emphasis on proving themselves to campers, rather than the other way around, has earned institutional support.

“When you’ve lost your home and are forced to survive outside, it can take a lot to trust someone again,” said Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury. “Our outreach teams go out day after

day to bridge that gap by treating people with dignity and connecting them to healthcare and safety.”

Transition Projects is the largest shelter operator in the city and can find beds for people who are working with the navigation team more quickly than if they went on their own.

Most people go to the new River District Navigation Center, which opened near the Broadway Bridge in August. The 100-bed shelter, which was built to be a temporary stop for people who also need more than a place to sleep that night, accepts three people a day from the navigation team.

So on this October day, Burbank and Heick were the only ones who got a spot for that night.

Another man approached the navigation team along the Interstate 205 multi-use path. He was told there was a backlog and he'd have to wait until morning for a spot. But he filled out the intake forms anyway.

He was cold. He was wet. He told them he was ready for shelter. But he also knew he wouldn't make it downtown on his own, even if they gave him a bus pass. So Casey Culley, one of the team members, made plans to meet him near his campsite the next day to take public transportation to the center.

“That's all he needed was a little push, and that's the way to do it,” Culley said. “To me, it's about our connecting and consistency. People can feel that.”

‘That's why we're here’

Larry Finley was evicted from his apartment that he shared with a roommate about six months ago.

He is 63 and doesn't want to spend winter outside, but he can't afford a place with his disability payments alone. He also doesn't want to keep getting moved by city crews or police from his campsite, which he said takes all day for him to set up and then half of another to recover.

When he heard Culley's voice as he talked through the wall of a neighboring tent, Finley stuck his head out and asked if there was an update on a shelter or permanent housing for him.

Finley has a small black and grey poodle-chihuahua mix named Buddy that makes it a little harder to find housing. But even though Culley tells him “no,” Finley believes Culley when he says he will keep checking back. “It's going to be at the top of my radar,” Culley said.

“I don't know if people tell you this, but we appreciate you being out here,” Finley said, standing in the doorway of his tent with Buddy at his feet.

Finley thinks a lot of money is spent on homeless services in the city without much payoff for people on the street. But, he says, he's been touched that the navigation team shows up every day.

“That's why we're out here,” Culley said.

The Portland Tribune

Incentives for more multi-family housing before the City Council on Wednesday

*By Jim Redden
November 03, 2019*

The Better Housing by Design recommendations are intended to encourage more and better multi-family housing projects.

The City Council will consider revising development and design standards in multi-family residential zones outside the urban core on Wednesday, Nov. 6.

The recommendations were generated during a multi-year project called Better Housing by Design (BHD) undertaken by the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (BPS) at the direction of the council.

The proposed code changes in these middle- and higher-density zones are intended to encourage additional housing that is more livable. Much of the additional construction is expected to be concentrated along major transportation corridors with frequent transit service.

The zones are where multi-family housing developments — including four-plexes, townhouses, rowhouses and apartment buildings — are currently allowed. Among other things, the proposed changes would give size bonuses to projects with a significant number of units affordable to households earning 60 percent or less of the area's median family income.

Parking requirements would also be eliminated for some projects.

The Better Housing by Design project has a focus on East Portland, although it covers other parts of the city as well, including areas of Southwest Portland outside of downtown.

"Between now and 2035, 80 percent of the roughly 100,000 new housing units developed in Portland will be multi-dwelling units. Nearly one-quarter of the total growth will be in multi-dwelling zones outside the Central City. Many of those buildings will be along transit corridors and in mixed use centers," reads the ordinance to be considered by the council.

According to BHD materials, the proposed changes will:

- Help meet Portland's diverse housing needs, including housing that is affordable to lower income households and units designed for people of all ages and abilities.
- Include open space and green elements that support healthy living for residents.
- Be designed and scaled to fit in with neighborhood characteristics in middle-density zones.
- Use new approaches to create street and pedestrian connections in areas where they don't exist or are insufficient.

"As Portland grows, more people will be living in multi-family housing in and around bustling centers and corridors. By 2035, up to 80 percent of the anticipated 120,000 new households will likely be in multi-family buildings and other compact housing types. A large portion of this new housing will be located in Portland's multi-dwelling zones," the project website says.

The BHD recommendations are supported by the Home Builders Association of Metropolitan Portland and 1000 Friends of Oregon. They are different than the Residential Infill Project. There is no organized opposition.

You can learn more at BHD website at www.portlandoregon.gov/bps/71903.

'Girl Cops Are Awesome' event engages Portland youth

KOIN 6 News

November 03, 2019

Members of the Portland Police Bureau, the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office and other agencies talked with kids at the bureau's training center in Northeast Portland on Nov. 2.

Women in law enforcement came together on Saturday to show girls what it means to serve.

Members of the Portland Police Bureau, the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office and other agencies talked with kids at the 4th Annual Girl Cops Are Awesome event at the bureau's training center in Northeast Portland on Nov. 2.

The events first began after a young girl could not find a police officer costume designed for girls for Halloween. After her mother posted her daughter's sadness on social media, a number of female officers started to post photos of themselves in uniform with the headline, "Girl Cops are Awesome."

It went viral, and now the agencies are working to show girls what opportunities could be ahead for them in public service. Only about 16% of officers in Portland are female.

"I want to emphasize—our focus is on women today, but it's open to everyone," said Lt. Tina Jones of the Portland Police Bureau. "It's really important for all of us to see this as a viable career path for girls and young women."

The event was open to all ages, and kids were encouraged to wear their Halloween costumes. A number of agencies from the Interstate-5 corridor took part in Saturday's event.

Willamette Week

Portland Accepting Bids to Demolish O'Bryant Square, Downtown's Notorious "Paranoid Park"

By Henry Latourette Miller

November 2, 2019

"Just get it to zero. Flat and structurally sound. A place that doesn't require a fence around it."

After closing downtown Portland's O'Bryant Square for 19 months due to safety concerns, City Hall is now seeking an estimate for the cost of demolishing the subterranean parking structure, which would also require the total redevelopment of the park above.

Also known as "Paranoid Park" or "Needle Park" for its popularity with Portland's urban misfits, the 47-year-old square is named after the city's first mayor, Hugh O'Bryant, and has served as a respite for downtown's skaters, punks, musicians, the houseless, users and addicts, and the white-collar crowd on their lunch break for decades.

Yet the structure supporting one of Portland's most unique, if notorious, public spaces has had issues almost from the start, according to the Portland Bureau of Transportation, which operates the SmartPark garage beneath the park.

The biggest problem has been water leaking into the garage over a span of decades, causing significant damage that PBOT estimates would cost \$2 million to \$4 million to repair—and even then the structure would still have a "significantly shortened lifespan."

Rather than patch up a compromised parking lot, PBOT has sent out a request for proposal (RFP) that includes an item describing what it hopes to do with the space:

"PBOT intends to demolish the condemned parking structure at 808 SW Harvey Milk St.," reads the RFP task referring to O'Bryant Square. "This task will develop construction documents for demolition, including a utility abandonment plan and provisions for structural backfill for the portion of the site that is below ground."

The city's plans were first reported Oct. 30 by the Daily Journal of Commerce.

According to Marshall Runkel, Commissioner Chloe Eudaly's chief of staff, the purpose of the documents is to determine how much a demolition would cost. Once the cost estimates are drawn up, PBOT will present them to City Council, which will determine the next step for the Square.

Runkel told WW there are no alternatives to demolition being considered at this time due to the danger the structure poses to the public. He also noted the low performance of the garage and the park's notoriety as a poorly designed public space.

"From a design perspective, the entrance to the garage is on the north side, and there's a little perch above the entrance to the garage that provided a uniquely good place if you wanted to do something that is not allowed in downtown Portland," Runkel added with a chuckle.

While a high price tag for the demo could keep the square in limbo, Runkel says that if it were approved, the goal for the park would be simple: "Just get it to zero. Flat and structurally sound. A place that doesn't require a fence around it."

If the parking lot is demolished, Runkel says it could allow the city to repurpose the square into an interim park, which would mean the public space that has been fenced off for a year and a half could be put to use again. One idea he floated was a grassy space that could host food carts until a new structure is ready to be built—but "we've got a lot of steps in the process before we can consider that."

More than one local architecture firm has drawn up designs.

Last year, Hennebery Eddy Architects presented a possible design at Design Week to a panel that included Runkel, and SERA Architects drew up its vision for the park as early as 2011. These designs do not include the perches obscured from street view.

O'Bryant Square is not the only garage on the RFP. Other tasks in the document include replacing fluorescent lights with LEDs, repairing and waterproofing concrete, and improving ADA accessibility in the City's SmartPark garages.

The first task calls updating the electrical infrastructure of the garages, which would allow the City to replace 150 of its vehicles with electric vehicles and install publicly available EV charging stations.

PBOT is expecting to have responses to its RFP next week and a cost estimate for demolishing the garage by summer 2020. Portland Parks and Recreation is planning on presenting a long-term proposal for the park by 2023.

The Portland Mercury

Airbnb Changes Website to Meet Portland's Mandatory Short-Term Rental Rules

*By Alex Zielinski
November 1, 2019*

Starting today, when Portland Airbnb hosts login to their account, they'll be presented with two options: Input a number associated with their city permit to operate a short-term rental—or apply for one.

After years of back-and-forth with the City of Portland, Airbnb will be requiring their Portland hosts have a Short Term Rental (STR) permit, a piece of documentation that the city made mandatory in 2014.

To obtain this permit, which applies to anyone renting out their home through Airbnb, HomeAway, VRBO, or other STR platforms, rental spaces must pass a basic safety check (conducted by the city) and hosts must pay a permit fee (which can cost up to \$196) and notify their neighbors.

Hosts are also required to occupy their rental residence for at least nine months out of the year. (This rule was created to protect affordable rental homes from being turned into year-round short-term rental pads, further shrinking Portland's diminishing affordable housing supply.)

The city's been largely unable to enforce these regulations because Airbnb—the largest short-term rental provider in Portland—has refused to share data on the location of their host's rentals with the city, keeping inspectors from knowing who may be in violation. At the same time, Airbnb hasn't required its hosts obtain a STR permit before operating in Portland.

A 2018 audit by the City of Portland estimated that only 22 percent of Portland's short-term rental hosts were operating with the mandatory STR permit.

In August, after unsuccessfully trying to obtain Airbnb host data through a subpoena, the City of Portland agreed upon a 'memorandum of understanding' with the company. In the memo, Airbnb agreed to begin sharing data on its hosts (with the hosts' approval) and requiring all hosts obtain a STR permit before renting out their space. In return, the city would let Airbnb hosts fill out the permit application on the Airbnb website—instead of dealing with the city's clunkier system.

Airbnb hosts now have until December 31 to apply for a STR permit. After that point, any Airbnb listings without a permit will be removed from the website.

In October, the city published a follow-up to its 2018 audit of the STR program, which showed little improvement to the unenforceable system. "Once the data sharing and revised registration process is in place," the audit read. "Portland should have information it needs to enforce the short-term rental market."

With that process now in place, Portland might finally be able to pull back the curtain on its mysterious STR market.

The Portland Business Journal

Connecting People of Color in the Whitest City in America

By Malia Spencer

October 31, 2019

A lack of diversity in Portland is hampering efforts by employers to attract and retain people of color. Research shows that retaining those employees is equally difficult. Here's what's being done to change that.

When the executive recruiter on the other end of the phone said CFO at “the Port of Portland,” Dionne Denson was a bit startled at the idea of living in Maine.

Not Portland, Maine, the recruiter clarified, Portland, Oregon.

That was welcome news for Denson, who at the time was deputy commissioner and chief financial officer of the Georgia Department of Public Health. The Atlanta native was ready for a new challenge, and the West Coast Port — which oversees Portland International Airport, four marine terminals and several industrial parks — was definitely that. ¶

Next up, researching Portland.

“I was not familiar with the city,” said Denson, who is African American.

She quickly learned that she was contemplating a move to what’s often referred to as the “whitest city in America.” Denson wasn’t deterred. The professional opportunity was too good, and she started as CFO at the Port of Portland in June.

“I grew up in Atlanta (which has a majority black population), but it’s still the South and race relations isn’t unknown,” she said. “I went into this with a clear understanding that people are people. It was not a barrier for me.”

That’s not always the case.

In 2018, Portland’s population was 71 percent white, according to U.S. Census data. The nation as a whole was 60.4 percent white. Fewer people of color means fewer opportunities to connect with individuals who might share similar cultural traditions or backgrounds and who might be confronting similar issues — good and bad — in the workplace. The difficulty connecting for African-American professionals is exacerbated by the lack of black neighborhoods, a result in large part of Portland’s racist history.

That reality can make recruiting professionals of color, such as Denson, difficult. Research shows that retaining them can be just as hard.

There are efforts underway to counter that. Organizations and events such as Partners in Diversity, Pitchblack and Simple-X-Mixer provide spaces for people of color to make professional and social connections.

“If people thought super negatively about moving here, they wouldn’t,” said Mari Watanabe, executive director of Partners in Diversity, which runs a quarterly networking event called Say Hey!. “It’s why these programs are so important when people get here. It is hard to find community. If people read how white the city is, those fears can be allayed if they come to Say Hey! and see hundreds of people of color who want to meet them and network.”

Community matters

There are U.S. cities that may be whiter than Portland, but based on Census data from the past decade, Portland is at or near the bottom in terms of diversity among major metropolitan areas. It's a fact that has garnered lots of national attention over the years. The Atlantic, CNN, The Washington Post, the LA Times have all written about it.

The demographics are changing — slowly. Portland State University's Population Research Center studied in-migration trends between 2012 and 2014 and found that 38 percent of people moving to the city were individuals of color. That was larger than the total number of people of color already in Portland, which was 25 percent at the time.

Digging deeper into the data, however, there was a disturbing finding: every major community of color — Asian, Pacific Islander, Hispanic — grew, except African Americans. The number of African-American residents in Portland actually declined by 800 between 2012 and 2014.

In contrast, cities such as Austin, Minneapolis/St. Paul and Pittsburgh gained thousands of new African-American residents, according to PSU's report.

Geographically defined community is a powerful thing. It's a place where individuals who live, shop and sometimes work are often bound by similar traditions and backgrounds. When it comes to African Americans, Portland no longer has that. Decades of exclusionary laws, discrimination and gentrification have dismantled traditionally African-American neighborhoods throughout the city.

The volunteer-run Albina Vision group hopes to change that with a plan to restore the lower Albina neighborhood, a historic hub of Portland's black community that was destroyed to make way for I-5, Memorial Coliseum and an Emanuel Hospital expansion. The effort, though, is a 50-year plan, and there are plenty of hurdles to clear to make it a reality.

For now, the city's black population is much more dispersed than it has been historically.

"It's nice to go to a black barber shop in Hillsboro or Deadstock Coffee in downtown, but there is no hub," for black culture, said Stephen Green, a Portland-area native, organizer of the startup pitch competition Pitchblack and chief operating officer of sneaker design school Pensole Design. "Everyone wants to feel like there is a hub to go and soak it up. That's what we have lost in Northeast Portland."

PSU released its study in 2016. Researchers are now working with Partners in Diversity to identify the factors behind outmigration. PSU's Larry Martinez, an assistant professor in applied industrial and organizational psychology, has interviewed 30 individuals who have been recognized at PiD Say Hey! networking events, 15 who are still living in Portland and 15 who have left. He is now conducting a survey of 1,300 people from the Say Hey! network to get a larger sample.

"You hear anecdotally the things that push people away, and the role of community is really central to all of that," Martinez said. "A lot of people said they were lacking in community organizations and community events and these natural community spaces that a lot of cities have where people can get special foods, event celebrations, religious services or beauty services."

The lack of emotional support that often comes with community can be isolating and can drive professionals of color away, no matter how much that individual might love their job.

Consider micro-aggressions, subtle behaviors that can be difficult to identify as racist or sexist. Martinez said trying to determine if some small action by a coworker or manager was

discriminatory is emotionally exhausting. It is even more so without the support of colleagues and friends who might have been confronted with similar experiences.

Providing opportunities to connect is precisely what Partners in Diversity is doing with its Say Hey! network. And the organization isn't alone.

Creating spaces

Knowledge Murphy moved to Portland from Pittsburgh in August. When he stepped off the plane, his brother, already a resident, knew exactly where to take him: Pitchblack. The annual pitch event for black entrepreneurs was happening that day at Wieden+Kennedy. The brothers drove directly there from the airport.

“He didn't know when the next event with that many African Americans in one space would be,” said Murphy, who is black.

Community-building has been a byproduct of Pitchblack since Green launched it in 2015. The objective is to give black entrepreneurs an opportunity to showcase their ideas in front of a slice of the Portland business community they might not otherwise have access to.

“I'm lucky that I spent my career supporting black, Latinx and female-owned businesses, but I'm also in these white (business) circles that just don't know these businesses exist,” said Green, an economist and ex-banker who is himself black and Latino.

The only requirement for Pitchblack is that the participants are African American.

This year, 12 entrepreneurs pitched ideas and a theme emerged — one that was not planned — about creating black spaces within Portland where the community could gather.

RaShaunda Brooks pitched Young Gifted Black/Brown, an event business that hosts parties and other events centered around black and brown voices and experiences. Perez Westbrook pitched Forever Hungry, a visual art brand he wants to extend to a physical space that is part gallery and store, part café and part art education space. And Jonathan Riley, CEO of marketing firm Better, touted his community platform, Blaq Athlete, which connects professional black athletes with student athletes to impart lessons learned.

The community theme sent a powerful message about the need for, and the desire to create, spaces for black professionals, and the role those spaces can play in keeping workers in Portland.

“One of the things I tell companies is to have a community ambassador program,” Green said of businesses trying to retain minority employees who were recruited from elsewhere. “Help the employee but more importantly help that employee's partner find place and a sense of community here in Portland. If you go to work every day and love it, but your partner doesn't like it (here), you leave.”

Murphy, who works in sustainability, did his homework before deciding to move to Portland. He studied the level of diversity in green jobs in 12 cities for a research project. He acknowledged the lack of diversity in Portland but was impressed that people here seem willing to have a dialogue about it and work to address it.

Partners in Diversity's Say Hey! has become one of the city's largest networking organizations for people of color, serving as a welcome wagon of sorts for newcomers to Portland by introducing them to other members of the group at quarterly events. Say Hey!'s participant list includes 9,000 individuals who are invited to each event, which always reach capacity. Depending on the venue, anywhere from 550 to 750 people attend.

“Say Hey! is really important,” said Partners in Diversity’s Watanabe. “We know anecdotally that if people can’t find their community they will leave.”

Simple X is a quarterly Portland event designed to bring together black professionals, no matter the industry, to network, share ideas and build social capital, said co-founder Wilson Kubwayo.

Kubwayo, who moved to Portland last year to run business development for the immigrant and refugee resource site HelloUSA, wanted a way to connect with the community. He also wanted a way to highlight the stories and achievements of the city’s black leaders to inspire young professionals.

The events always sell out and are hosted at various locations around the city. On average, 60 to 70 people attend, though in September, a Simple X event hosted at software company New Relic drew 200 people.

Kubwayo also sees the events as a way for companies to build relationships within the black community, particularly as so many talk about how to find black professionals.

Simple X is working now to finalize a location for a Dec. 12 mixer.

Can we shed the rep?

Serilda Summers-McGee moved to Portland in 2006 and has witnessed first hand the difficulty of retaining employees of color. Until recently, Summers-McGee was chief human resources officer for the city of Portland. Today she runs a consulting business called Workplace Change.

Summers-McGee connected with Say Hey! soon after she arrived. Of the professionals that were introduced during the same Say Hey! event, she is the only one who is still in Portland.

“Portland is a town that talks about stuff. I don’t know what is going to be the tipping point,” for real change in demographics, she said. “We need to sustain critical mass. We need to keep people here and build upon that energy.”

One place to start would be hiring more black professionals into executive positions, she said.

“When you bring in executives who are underrepresented they bring a different amount of power and influence over an organization,” Summers-McGee said. “They get to make hiring decisions. They get to make firing decisions. They get to make compensation decisions. They get all those things that begin to impact your culture.”

McGee and her team at Workforce Change are currently working with 48 local companies on recruitment and other HR projects.

Recruiting success depends a lot on where those potential executives live now. Recruiting people of color from places like Pittsburgh or Detroit isn’t a tough sell, even with Portland’s “whitest city” reputation, she said. The job opportunities in Portland often outweigh any reservations recruits might have.

Cities with large middle class black populations such as Atlanta, Houston or Washington, D.C. are a different story. When talking to potential candidates of color in those cities, Summers-McGee said quality of life can be the draw.

“If these micro-spaces are created or (places) where people of color are thriving the likelihood of us being able to retain people here would be amazing,” she said. “That’s the greatest immediate impact to the city of Portland that this kind of system could establish. There are still few places that people of color can go that expresses who they are from a cultural standpoint, a cultural release.”

The Port of Portland's Denson has found that with Say Hey!

She was introduced to the group by Steve Nakana, the Port's social equity program manager and Partners in Diversity board member. She was moved, in part, by curiosity. Atlanta, with its large black population, doesn't have many programs specifically designed for professionals of color.

"Honestly, I went to scope it out," she said, adding it has been refreshing to hear the conversations around race, inclusivity and equity in Portland.

"To come here and be able to immediately plug into a community of color," has been welcoming, she said. "There may be this one narrative of a white city or racism, but that has not been my experience."

So what does she tell friends and family back in Georgia about living in Portland? (I tell them), "I think I found my tribe."