

My name is Ken Neubeck and I have lived in Eugene, OR, for over seventeen years. I am a 78-year-old retired university professor and have made it a point to be active in the Eugene community, serving eight years on the Eugene Human Rights Commission (co-founding and chairing its Poverty and Homelessness Work Group), as well as volunteering with the Egan Warming Centers and Occupy Medical as a peace-keeper and crisis counselor. Thus I am very familiar with homelessness and the treatment of people who are homeless in Eugene.

I think it is important to underscore the diversity of the homeless population, about which most people are unaware or too readily discount. Based on my volunteer experiences and outreach activities, members of this population may be elders who can no longer afford rising rent prices; prisoners who served their time but who no one wants to hire or rent to; mothers and children fleeing domestic violence situations; college students for whom tuition and fees leave insufficient funds for housing; people who have disabilities that make it impossible to work and for whom Social Security Disability is not enough to pay rent and eat too; gay and trans youth who have been pushed out of home by their families; people of color who are disproportionately represented among those in extreme poverty; veterans suffering from PTSD and other war-time traumas that are making it difficult to function in civilian life; youth who fled from home in response to criminal, including sexual, abuse; people who are addicted to drugs, either a cause of their homelessness or a means of blocking out the daily traumas visited upon those who are homeless; foster children who have aged out of foster care; adults and children who have lost their housing due to medical expenses or job losses leading to eviction from rental housing or foreclosure on mortgaged homes; loss of housing as an economic consequence of layoffs or reduced working hours stemming from the current pandemic.

Eugene has about 4,000 people who are without housing, most of whom are unsheltered. It is estimated that 135 new people are added to this population each month. The city has no public shelter and existing facilities allow for indoor sheltering of only 350-450 people. Most people who are homeless have no safe and legal place to be as a consequence of city ordinances and policies. The principal means by which Eugene addresses homelessness involves using the police department to enforce existing laws that have a disproportionate and negative impact on people who have no choice but to live on the streets, under bridges, in the woods, or along the banks of the Willamette River. Despite the pandemic guidelines issued by the federal Centers for Disease Control, Eugene continues to conduct "sweeps" of people who are self-sheltering for survival, destroying "camps" but providing no alternative places to self-shelter in the absence of a sufficient number of shelter beds. The city's anti-camping ordinance and its criminal trespass ordinance are the main weapons used to roust individuals and groups who simply need somewhere to go where they can rest.

The consequences of existing laws used to move people who have no place they can legally be are brutal. Each year some 25-35 people who are homeless in Eugene die prematurely from conditions that are preventable. The physical and mental health of those who are unhoused are compromised by everything from dehydration to sleep deprivation. Fines are being levied on unhoused people even though they typically have no way to pay them, leading to arrests and criminal records that make it even harder to find employment or pass landlords' criminal background checks. Those on the streets are often victimized by theft and violence, both by some of their peers and by people who are housed. The latter are primarily responsible for the rising number of hate crimes directed at those who are homeless.