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‘DEALT A BAD HAND’: HOMELESS YOUTH IN OREGON HAVE A PLAN TO SAVE THEMSELVES

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David Buntjer, 18, was “technically” homeless months before his father was killed in 2019.

“We were sleeping at my uncle’s house. I don’t really call that homelessness because I was with my dad and at that point in time I believed that when I was with my dad, I was at home. It didn’t really matter where I was,” Buntjer said.

After his death, a friend of his father’s took him in. But three months later, she moved and there was no room for Buntjer or the friend’s two daughters.

Angellina Moore’s older sister moved in with other family members, but Buntjer and Moore decided to stay together. They were 16 and 15. The two would spend three years living on the streets before receiving the keys to their own apartment earlier this year.

They were among more than 1,500 Mid-Valley youth estimated to be homeless at any given time, a population that often goes unseen and unrecognized. Most of them aren’t standing on street corners or living in the area parks but instead staying with friends or in their own informal camps.

And while there are some services specifically for youth struggling with homelessness, they aren’t nearly enough.

The state entity responsible for runaway and homeless youth has been allocated just $3.1 million per biennium to fund a network of programs, organizations and volunteers working to assist thousands of youth. The area’s lone overnight shelter provides 10 beds for youth from Salem down to Eugene.

It is a tight budget for a network of services unequipped to truly help them, say the teens who have navigated the system — particularly as federal, state and local officials dole out hundreds of millions of dollars for area homeless adults. Oregon Lawmakers sent a $400 million funding package to Gov. Kate Brown’s desk this past legislative session.

Now, with support from state officials and advocates, youth are speaking up and demanding more. They suggest stopping the cycle of homelessness in the teenage years would significantly decrease the region’s chronically homeless population in future years. And they’ve come up with their own plan to do it.

DAVID BUNTJER (LEFT) AND ANGELLINA MOORE WERE 15 AND 16, RESPECTIVELY, WHEN THEY BEGAN NAVIGATING HOMELESSNESS. (ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL)

THOUSANDS OF YOUTH AT RISK IN OREGON

A needs assessment report released by Oregon’s Department of Human Services estimated there are 8,278 youth statewide likely to need safe, affordable housing and services.

A new report from the Mid-Willamette Valley Homeless Alliance estimates that of the 74,000 youth age 13-24 in the Mid-Valley, 6,900 are at risk of homelessness. At least 1,540 youth are experiencing homelessness, the report estimates.

But local experts estimate the database used by local service providers called the Homeless Management Information System undercounts the actual population of youth experiencing homelessness by 30-50%.

Youth of color are over-represented among those experiencing homelessness, according to the report.

In 2021, data about race was available for 781 Mid-Valley youth experiencing homelessness. Data about ethnicity was

available for 774 youth. It indicated that Latino and Black youth especially are more likely to be homeless.

The region's population is about 25% Latino, according to the 2020 Census but about 34% of the youth homeless population identifies as Latino. And about 0.8% of the overall population is Black, compared to about 5.5% of the Black homeless youth population.

The local data indicates a majority of the area's homeless youth are female, matching a broader area trend in which homeless women overall outnumber men. Such numbers are unusual, nationwide about 70% of homeless individuals are men and 30% are women.

Homeless males in the area tend to be younger, age 13-17, while homeless females tend to be older, age 18-24, according to the local data.

'THEY DON'T WANT TO DEAL WITH KIDS'

The causes of homelessness vary among Oregon's youth.

Some have run away from physical and/or sexual abuse. Some have been forced out of their homes because of their gender identity, sexual orientation, mental illness or substance abuse. Youth in the juvenile justice system may become homeless after release. Youth that have been in foster care or whose families have been homeless also are more likely to become homeless themselves.

Buntjer and Moore remember days worrying about where they could sleep. It is a particularly scary challenge for youth, they said, as older adults experiencing homelessness do not welcome them at camps like Cascades Gateway or Wallace Marine Park.

Buntjer recalls being threatened with a machete after asking older people if they could sleep near them.

"They don't want to deal with kids," Moore said.

People at the parks often assume youth mean runaways. Runaways mean cops and drama, they said.

To avoid suspicion, Buntjer and Moore kept their "group" small. At least half the group had to know a person before they could stay at their camp. The group often slept in emptier areas of downtown or at an unofficial youth camp near Riverfront Park. The group would move their campsite every three days.

Mostly, teens who use the drop-in center will sleep nearby, waiting for the center to open, she said.

While living on the street, they met Kloi Spencer. Spencer also had become homeless at 15. She became part of their group.

She had intermittently experienced homelessness with her mother but they had stayed in a shelter. At 15, she was on the streets for the first time. For several months she was addicted to drugs and in an abusive relationship. Moore said she became Spencer's "street mom."

A HOMELESS CAMP AT WALLACE MARINE CITY PARK IN MAY 2021. ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

It is an incredibly dangerous place for youth, she said, and girls are being trafficked "heavily."

Violence also is common on the streets. She pointed to a broken tooth which she said happened after an older homeless woman sucker-punched her randomly when she was skating by on her longboard. She also had to receive several stitches on her ear.

'THEY SEE DIRTY AND GROSS AND LAZY'

While enrolled in Salem-Keizer Public Schools, Moore, Spencer and Buntjer would have gotten some assistance from the federal McKinney-Vento Program used to ensure educational stability for students without a home, or in transition.

Through the McKinney-Vento Act, youth and children without fixed, regular or adequate nighttime residence have the right to enroll and attend classes immediately despite a lack of immunization records, proof of residency or other documents. They also are able to receive transportation to and from their school, access various services, receive free or reduced school meals, and must be offered assistance to other various services.

Currently, there are about 1,200 students in the Salem-Keizer school district without stable housing.
But data from the McKinney-Vento Program does not include youth who are not enrolled in school. And many homeless youths stop attending school, dropping off the district's radar.

Moore, Buntjer and Spencer all dropped out before graduating. Buntjer and Moore dropped out twice.

Trying to hide is also a large reason homeless youth drop out of school, Moore said.

Spencer said no one knew she was homeless for a large portion of the time she was on the streets. In an abusive relationship, her boyfriend at the time kept her away from others and she wasn't able to call her mom.

“There is a lot of youth that are unfortunately in situations that I have been in and they’re not being accounted for,” Spencer said.

The judgment youth often face also keeps them hidden, Moore said. It can be easy to spot who homeless youth are at school.

“It’s not normal for a kid to be walking around with three backpacks,” she said.

Rumors are easily started and easily spread, even to other schools. Moore remembers random people walking up to her last year to ask her about her situation. She had no idea who they were.

“They see homeless and they see dirty and gross and lazy,” she said. “They don’t know that some kids are homeless because their parents beat them. Or their parents are dead and they didn’t want to go into the (child protective services) system so they ran away.”

Moore dropped out of school by her junior year, largely because of the judgment she faced. But she said another reason youth drop out is that going to school is a risk. She knows of other students hiding their belongings in bushes near the school or underneath bleachers.

“They can’t trust leaving what little stuff they have and you can’t carry it around school all day,” she said.

The fear of losing everything continues even after dropping out of school. She remembers how devastating it was to find the tent she and Butjner had purchased after saving up for months was stolen within three days.

“It’s hard,” Moore said. “Every day you try to go to work and hope that your home that you made is actually still there.”

It means someone has to stay at the camp at all times.

Moore said the group Butjner and she stayed with would send two or three people to pick up food boxes at the resource center while she stayed at the camp.

‘CARDS ARE STACKED AGAINST THEM’

The HOME Drop-In Center “was pretty much it” for the resources Moore has been able to turn to, she said. Youth are able to receive three meals a day, wash their clothes, take a shower, use a computer, figure out how to apply for identification or relax in a safe environment. But doors close at 7 p.m.

“The drop-in can only do so much,” Moore said.

There is a single overnight shelter dedicated to youth in Salem: Taylor’s House. The 10-bed shelter is run by the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency. It provides emergency shelter for youth ages 11-18.

The overnight shelter opened in 2018 after then-high school student Raul Marquez presented the idea to the United Way of the Willamette Valley’s board and received $100,000 in seed money. The house was named after a homeless girl named

ANGELLINA MOORE, 18, WAS HOMELESS AT 15, BUT NOW SERVES AS SECRETARY OF THE REGION'S HOMELESS YOUTH ACTION BOARD BACKBONE AND HAS HOUSING.
ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

Taylor who died because she had no warm place to sleep.

Oregon lawmakers approved $200,000 for the shelter and more than 100 private donors raised an additional $400,000.

“As a senior at McKay High School, I find it unacceptable to hear about Taylor and other teens my age who have died on the streets of Salem,” Raul wrote to lawmakers.

It is a sentiment echoed by providers years later.

“I get kind of a righteous anger,” said Shanta Frisbee, program manager for Health, Outreach, Shelter, Transitions when talking about all the stories she has heard while working as a service provider in Salem.

HOST has a drop-in resource center for ages 18-24. HOST also provides Transitional Living Program, a multi-phase program for young adults to gain the knowledge, skills, and support necessary to transition to stable housing.

“We’re Salem, the capital of Oregon, and we have nothing? We should be modeling for the whole state.”

There are only 10 beds for youth under 18, zero emergency beds specifically for 18 to 24-year-olds, 14 beds for transitional housing, said Tricia Frizzell, program director for HOME. Transgender youth have nowhere to turn at all.

“That just adds to the trauma,” Frisbee said.

Youth want to have a future, she said, but “it just seems like a lot of the cards are stacked against them.”

‘NOT AS MUCH OF A FOCUS ON IT’

The state office responsible for the youth experiencing homelessness program is housed within the Department of Human Services and remains a “relatively small program.”

The office hired a second person for the first time this year. Matthew Rasmussen oversees the Youth Experiencing Homelessness Program and has been doing so for six years. The program has been around for 10 years.

With an operating budget of $3.1 million per biennium for the entire state, Rasmussen is able to fund “very small portions” of programming targeted at youth and young adults experiencing homelessness such as drop-in centers and day shelters.

The program also funds a few street outreach programs that go into the community and try to locate young people where they are.

“We pretty much operate on a very tight budget so there’s historically not been a lot of opportunity for like, ‘Hey, I’m doing this. Do you have any start-up money?’ Or anything like that. It’s a little bit of a challenge on that front,” Rasmussen said.

It’s also a challenge, he said, because this population is often overlooked.

“So its something that oftentimes is not as visible so as a result sometimes there’s not as much of a focus on it,” he said.

Spencer is frustrated by how little money goes towards youth. She understands that supporting chronically adult homeless is necessary but believes focusing on youth needs to be prioritized.

“If we nip it (homelessness) in the bud then the numbers will go down,” Spencer said. “Over time it will continue to get better because there aren’t kids who are 17, 18, 19 going into adulthood and don’t know how to because they’re on the street and don’t know properly how to be an adult.”

Despite funding limitations, Rasmussen said the network of providers focusing on youth has continued to grow, as has the understanding and support from the broader community.

“I think it’s a lot of a community getting together and speaking the same language around youth and understanding how youth fit into the bigger homelessness planning need,” Rasmussen said.

LOOKING FORWARD

Last year, a group of homeless and formerly homeless teens took it upon themselves to tackle the issue. They formed a youth action board in partnership with the Mid-Willamette Valley Homeless Alliance and named it Backbone.

Moore and Buntjer became homeless a year or two before Backbone existed. They were both there for the formation of the board and both maintain full-time positions on the board. It’s a position both are proud of. Moore has served as secretary of the board since August. Spencer is the board’s leader.

The board is made up of 18 youth members who have all experienced homelessness.

Moore said she joined to “end the fear that kids my age go through dealing with this stuff.”

HOME YOUTH SERVICES OFFERS A SAFE SPACE FOR YOUTH AGES 11 TO 18. ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

“There’s a lot that goes on with being homeless. I don’t want to find kids in the situations that I found myself in the last three years,” she said. “I want to show them that even though we were dealt a bad hand, it’s not always going to be bad.”

Spencer has several ideas for solutions, including giving people designated places to camp and the correct resources to be able to get onto their feet.

“There’s enough supplies to go around. There’s enough food to go around. I’ve lived in Wallace Marine Park. I know what it is like to live in homeless camps,” Spencer said. “There are a lot of people stealing people’s things and there’s a lot of danger and I feel like part of that is because people don’t have what they need.”

Youth boards exist in other parts of Oregon and the country, including Clackamas County. Youth are being put in the driver’s seat, Frizell said, in an effort to “flip the system on its head.”

The board was critical after the region received a $3.7 million grant from the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development. Moore, alongside other youth board members and dozens of community partners, spent the past six months outlining how to best use the money.

The 58-page plan was submitted for HUD approval in late March.

The money will go toward fulfilling one vision: “Every youth and young adult has a safe and stable place in their community to live, sleep, connect and thrive, where each unique individual feels valued being their authentic self and has supported opportunities to become confidently self-sufficient.”

To reach that goal, the funding will be prioritized for projects that:

- Identify all unaccompanied youth.
- Use prevention and diversion strategies whenever possible.
- Use coordinated entry processes to effectively link all youth experiencing homelessness to housing and services that are tailored to their needs.
- Swiftly assist youth to move into permanent or non-time-limited housing with appropriate services and support.
- Have resources, plans and systems in place to continue to prevent and quickly end future experiences of homelessness among youth.
- Have a comprehensive youth homelessness system that ensures equity in access, experiences while seeking and receiving services, and outcomes for all across the geographic region.

The plan has been approved by HUD and the Request for Proposal process where community organizations will be able to submit proposals for funding began April 20. A committee made up of 50% youth and young adults who have experienced homelessness will review proposals for programs that align with the suggested plan and prevent and end youth homelessness in the region.

“So there’s a lot going on and it’s a lot going on with historically, probably, a less than ideal amount of funding to do the work in a meaningful way,” Rasmussen said. “We’re doing what we can with the resources that we’re given and continuing to seek growth in the work that is being done across the state.”

At a state level, the Youth Experiencing Homelessness Program started doing some work to bolster transitional living programs, which generally place youth in housing for 12 to 18 months as they finish and get enrolled in school or find employment.

Most recently, the program started a Host Home Demonstration Program to consider how local families could be trained and supported to act as host homes for young people across the state.

There are currently no host home programs in Marion or Polk counties, although the plan submitted for HUD approval suggests some of the $3.7 million go into replicating the model. Rasmussen estimates there are seven to 10 host home programs operational elsewhere in the state.

“Kids want to go to work, kids want to finish school, kids want to go to college, but it’s really hard to do that when you’re not in a space that is safe or welcoming or just a space in general,” Rasmussen said.

Host families are certified through the foster home program but the housing is not a foster home. Instead, the host family allows a young person to stay in an extra room to give them the opportunity to work towards their version of independence.

Eugene has one provider with a certified host home.

KLOI SPENCER, PRESIDENT OF THE REGION'S HOMELESS YOUTH ACTION BOARD BACKBONE, IN FRONT OF THE LOCKERS AT HOME YOUTH SERVICES. ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

‘I’VE GOT A GOAL AND I’M SET ON IT’

Frisbee and Frizzell are hopeful the days of minimal to no resources for youth in the region will end soon, especially with the ongoing involvement of youth like Moore, Spencer and Buntjer in decision-making.

Youth are fired up, Frizzell said.

It was a requirement for the grant that youth voices be equal and centered in decision-making power. It is a significant culture shift, Frizzell said.

“Youth voice has to be a part of that and not just in a consulting relationship but in a decision-making relationship,” she said. “I can almost guarantee you the results will be different than we’ve seen before.”

Spencer will continue as president of Backbone and has plans to eventually go back to school, but she doesn’t want to “overdo it.” She’s met with city leaders and spoken at statewide symposiums. She shares her story with anyone willing to listen. She is determined to make a career out of ending youth homelessness.

“I’ve got a goal and I’m set on it,” she said.

“It’s given me a lot of purpose,” Spencer added. “When all of this started, I was still in and out of the homeless camps and I didn’t know how to get my life right and I didn’t want to because I knew how much I had already done. It gave me a drive to want to get better. And then I was actually doing something good with my life.”

HOW TO HELP OR GET HELP

HOST (HOME, OUTREACH, SHELTER, TRANSITIONS) — 1143 Liberty St. N; provides support and transitional shelter to ages 18 to 24; 14-bed overnight dorm; drop-in center 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Friday. To donate to the HOST program, visit the Northwest Human Services website. Donations of basic needs including sleeping bags, jackets, backpacks and more can be dropped off at the HOST shelter. 503-588-5825.

HOME YOUTH AND RESOURCE CENTER — 625 Union St. NW; drop-in shelter for ages 11-17; provides three meals a day, showers and other immediate needs and resources; open daily from noon to 7 p.m. The center is looking for additional volunteers. Details are available online. 503-391-6428.

TAYLOR'S HOUSE — 24-hour emergency shelter for youth with 10 beds; point of entry is the HOME drop-in center.

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