

Tough Love Downtown

A Family Intervention by the Business Community

by Bill Furman

It is a little-known, shameful fact that in Portland as many as 1,500 youths between the ages of 12 and 21 live in the shadows of an underground world in conditions of poverty, squalor and hopelessness. Most of these youths are on the

streets for reasons beyond their control; if they have chosen street life, it is because their alternatives are often more grim. Many are fugitives from abusive families or untenable foster care situations. Some have been abandoned or expelled by their families. On the streets they become victims again, coping with poverty and resorting to subsistence crimes of theft, prostitution, and drugs. Finding a way to help these children and young adults requires more than desultory funding. Effective private/public partnerships may be the only way to solve apparently intractable social problems. This requires a coordinated approach taken by the city, county, and business community.

The homeless youth population is at least double the size it was ten years ago. Nonprofit social service contractors, whom the county pays to deal with this and similar problems, often employ different philosophies and methods that are a challenge for government officials to coordinate. A pervasive emphasis on process and community consensus by county and local governments erodes their power to hold these service providers accountable. Therefore, local governments need to form partnerships with those in the private sector and the foundation community to directly connect ongoing funding to measurable outcomes.

Few who have not participated in business during the last two decades can appreciate the relentless grinding down of corporate practices that do not contribute to productivity and efficiency. Today's business managers, especially in manufacturing, have embraced a form of socialism that empowers workers, compresses layers of management, and shortens lines

of communication. The segment of the private sector driven by this social Darwinism has a large stake in seeing that those in the public sector conduct their business more effectively, with a greater emphasis on pro-active management.

Business people who emphasize accountability and numbers for measuring the success of social programs may sometimes appear to be impatient, arrogant, and cold-blooded to public sector officials and social services providers. Moreover, many individual business people who are concerned about a young and vulnerable population also wish to improve the livability of downtown Portland while preserving its commercial viability.

For this reason they are accused by some of having a hidden, commercial agenda. While motives may be different for different people, in truth both social and livability goals have merit. Public sector employees and providers have no monopoly on compassion for the poor.

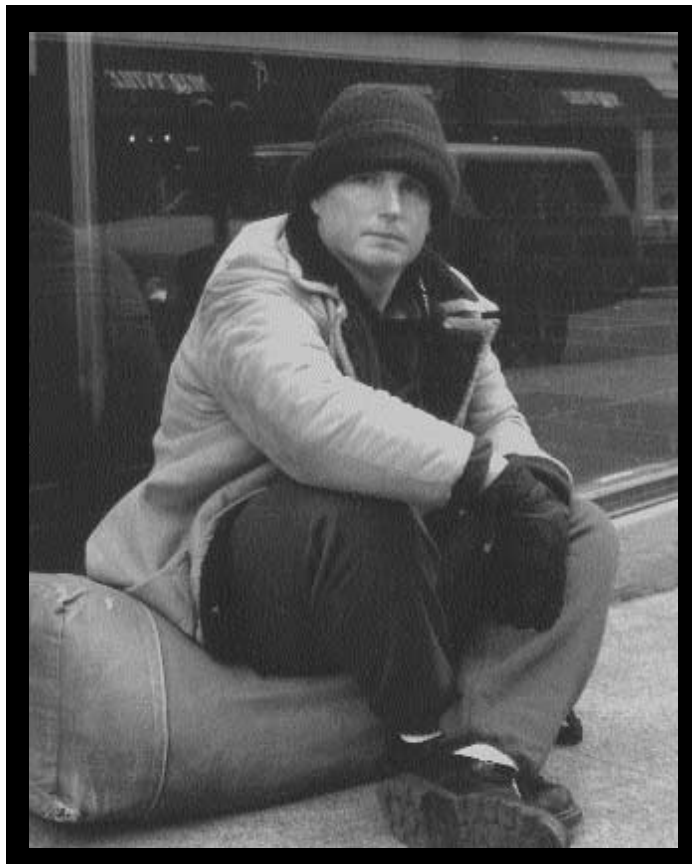
In the past, as Multnomah County and the City of Portland have struggled to deliver more services with less funding, the problem of homeless youth has attracted only token charitable donations from local businesses. Ironically, the business community has largely given this money without concern for outcomes or for the damage that may be done by contributing to a fragmented and sometimes enabling social service network.

Initiatives from the private sector that go beyond supplying money are often viewed by the public sector as naive. Often, these lack staying power i.e., agendas of business people can simply be waited out.

Often, the simple inability to agree on even the nature of the problem is a major obstacle to a successful alliance between private and public sector leaders, due largely to their different perspectives on outcome vs. service philosophies.

In spite of this, the disturbing nature of the homeless youth problem in downtown Portland has inspired the private and public sectors to form an effective partnership. Over the past two years, due in part to a well-staffed, siege-like effort put forth by the business community, three important events have shifted local government's approach to helping homeless youth.

The first was the emergence of a small group of determined private individuals concerned that financial constraints were driving



Scott Edward Holt, pictured here with duffelbag, is one of many homeless youths populating downtown Portland.

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only basic survival services. Success was not being measured by the number of kids leaving the streets, but by the number of beds provided and meals served. No one knew how many kids were able to leave street life, how many died, how many were caught up in the justice system or later became homeless adults. Other important questions were not being addressed. How many street kids were there? What caused them to be on the streets? How long had they been there, and what were we doing to help them become productive members of society?

Many of the individuals in this group had worked philanthropically with homeless children for years, and had become increasingly frustrated with a system focused on relief services instead of results. In 1998 they opened a new downtown center for street kids, New Avenues For Youth. They modeled their approach on the results of a survey of best practices in cities with similar problems. They focused on one successful program, Larkin Street in San Francisco, which has a remarkable record of helping 70 percent of its kids exit street life. Besides their experience, the founders of New Avenues brought with them funding from a number of Portland's high-profile

private-sector leaders. They recruited the brightest, master's-level social workers to work at New Avenues and hired Tom Potter, former Portland police chief and founder of community policing, as executive director. Knowing the importance of strong programs, they hired Daniel Pitasky, a key manager at Larkin Street, as program director. Upon Potter's retirement in the Fall of 1999, Pitasky became interim executive director.

New Avenues founders place a heavy emphasis on results and objective measurement. Their philosophy differs materially from the relief-based philosophy dominating the social service scene before their arrival. They regard street kids as victims, but not as victims who are unable to take charge of their own lives. They work with youths towards developing service plans that will assist them in exiting street life.

In its first year of operation, New Avenues helped 75 percent of the kids enrolled in its program to stabilize their lives and exit the street. The immediate success of New Avenues, based on its philosophy of concentrating on results, has significantly improved the entire homeless youth service system adding a fresh, vital element to the long-

standing efforts of Outside In, Janus Programs and the Salvation Army Greenhouse.

A second event facilitating these dramatic results was the formation in 1997 of the Homeless Youth Assessment Committee (HYAC) under the joint sponsorship of the Citizens Crime Commission and the Association for Portland Progress. The creation of HYAC was stimulated by business concerns about Portland's public safety and livability and by the growth of an increasingly active street youth population in Portland's downtown. Co-chaired by Oregonian publisher Fred Stickel and former US Representative Les AuCoin, the Committee included a number of senior-level business leaders.

A year-long investigation by HYAC of the issue of homeless youth included a definitive survey of published literature on the subject and testimony by over 50 public-sector officials and service providers. Its report, *Services to Homeless Youth*, dated



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January 7, 1998, was sharply critical of the public sector's handling of homeless youth issues. It concluded that the system was highly fragmented, lacked objectivity and accountability, and was inadequately funded. The report was very specific about improvements needed in basic services, resources, and philosophy to make the system more effective. Although street youths are perceived as a threat to public safety, the study found that these young people are threats mainly to themselves and that too little is being done to help them. In a surprising turn of events, this group of mostly hard-headed business people became advocates for those they had originally decided to investigate as a public safety menace.

A third major event improved the climate for reform when County Chair Beverly Stein and Mayor Vera Katz agreed that Multnomah County would assume sole control of policy direction and accountability for homeless youth issues. The job to revise the local government's approach to providing services fell to Iolanzo Poe, Director of Multnomah County's Department of Community and Family Services, and Mary Li, Senior Manager of the Department's Division of Community Programs and Partnerships.

Reacting to HYAC's criticism of insufficient funding for programs for downtown homeless youth and fully supported by



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county team quickly decided to allocate more public money to the system with the understanding that the private sector would also increase its contribution. Resources devoted to the problem more than doubled. All social service contracts were re-bid, and a new system design was put in place following recommendations of an advisory committee with broad community representation. The new system would be focused on creating a balance between relief measures and outcome-based services. A common database for clients would be established while continuing to protect confidentiality. The county would measure results and publish accurate and timely statistics.

In January of 1999, the county awarded contracts to four service providers downtown: the Salvation Army Greenhouse, New Avenues for Youth, Janus Youth, and Outside In. New Avenues and Greenhouse are privately funded charities that received public funding for the first time. Millions of new private dollars have been contributed, largely by major foundations, such as Meyer Memorial Trust, and by donations to the New Avenues center downtown, which is supported by a list of who's who of contributors from the business community. Outside In received an unprecedented \$1 million grant from the Gates Foundation and Oregon's Congressional delegation has helped with

federal funding. In addition, US Representatives Earl Blumenauer, of Oregon, and Nancy Pelosi, of California, helped earmark over \$250,000 for an intra-state, intra-agency database to track youths utilizing resources along the I-5 corridor.

In late fall of 1999, the HYAC asked County officials for a progress report on the new system. The County's response indicated the system to be well on its way towards the vision set out in the HYAC report and the plan developed by the community advisory committee. Although the coordination process has been time-consuming and difficult, regular communication, joint fundraising and collaborative service planning have improved services. Unfortunately, the system-wide database is not in place. Although youths are separated by age in some services, the entry-points to the system an Access and Assessment Center and two shelters could do more to provide services in a developmentally appropriate fashion. A shining light in the system has been the opening of the new \$3 million transitional housing program at New Avenues new building located in the southwest end of downtown. With 28 beds and room for vocational training, the building has already begun to fill long-standing gaps in the system. Developed with a combination of public and private funds, the facility contains a state-of-the-art commercial

The Citizens Crime Commission (CCC) is an investigative and policy affiliate of the Portland Chamber of Commerce, concerned about public safety in the tri-county area. Each year it researches a few issues related to public safety and advocates for reform when needed. The CCC maintains close relations with city and county leadership, especially with the criminal justice system, the City Council and the Multnomah County Commission. The Association for Portland Progress is made up largely of retail businesses in Portland's downtown area. It operates "Clean and Safe" and other programs which promote livability downtown. Its agenda is founded on promoting a vibrant, strong downtown.

kitchen and semi-private rooms which residents can call home for up to two years. Youth living in this new facility must be in case management and in school, employed or in vocational training actively working to successfully transition out of street life.

What can be learned from this experience? Despite disagreements with the private sector on method and philosophy, public-sector leadership is eager to embrace partnerships with businesses. Officials will tolerate the private sector's persistence when those in the private sector recognize the limitations of a purely business approach and are knowledgeable on the issues. New Avenue's success and that of the Alliance for Portland Progress and of the Citizen's Crime Commission initiative prove that public/private cooperation can be effective. Finding long-term solutions to social problems requires participation by individuals willing to do more than just write checks, complain and attend gala charity banquets. Notably, each year members of the Citizen's Crime Commission do considerable work to improve livability and public safety through concentrated projects. Together, through hard work, persistence and focus the same elements needed for success in business we can continue to make a difference.

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