

Portland Street Medicine, other volunteers join effort to avert COVID-19 crisis among area homeless

By John Rumler
For The Scribe

In February and March of this year, several news reports indicated that an epidemic of COVID-19 among the Portland area's homeless population was almost inevitable. According to a 2018 Housing and Urban Development study, Oregon has 14,476 homeless persons, and Multnomah County has 4,177; current estimates in Portland proper are close to 4,000.

"It was a grim outlook. We could hope for the best, but we still had to prepare for the worst," says Denis Theriault, public information officer for the city of Portland/Multnomah County Joint Office of Homeless Services (JOHS). "We were bracing for the likelihood of dozens of homeless persons becoming infected and

possibly much worse."

While the danger has not passed, so far, of the 2,510 confirmed diagnoses of COVID-19 in Oregon, 11 in the Portland area were homeless persons, and of the state's 103 deaths, (figures from May 1) not a single one was homeless.

The city and county ponied up \$70 million in a massive effort to stem the tide of the virus before it was able to reach critical mass, Theriault explained. Numerous volunteer groups, such as Portland Street Medicine, Street Roots and JOIN, helped JOHS distribute hundreds of hygiene kits, masks, bottled water and much more. In addition, volunteers gave out 5,000 laminated COVID-19 information cards printed in English and Spanish. JOHS also funded the construction of three new temporary, outdoor homeless shelters.

Early action and intervention

JOHS began emergency operations Jan. 28, a month before Oregon's first novel coronavirus case was diagnosed. By early March, it was working with more than a dozen volunteer groups in an aggressive, preventive fashion. "Portland Street Medicine was an immediate help," says Theriault. "They made a huge difference as they are uniquely equipped for this sort of difficult challenge. They are doctors and trained medical professionals, and they know the people and the territory. Plus, they have a track record and street cred."

Now with about 70 volunteers, Portland Street Medicine registered as a 501(c)3 entity in March 2019 and has been reaching out to the

homeless for more than three years.

With Portland's homeless shelters at capacity, and the many camps around the periphery of the city teeming with homeless people of all ages and ethnicities, it seemed like a recipe for disaster. In addition, many of the seniors already have numerous health challenges, exacerbated by poor nutrition and often drug, alcohol, and tobacco use, according to **Sharon Meieran, MD**.

Meieran, a Multnomah County commissioner, has a unique background that has prepared her for leadership during the COVID-19 crisis. With many years of experience as an ER physician, she is also a past president of the **Medical Society of Metropolitan Portland**, a long-time advocate for mentally challenged and homeless people, and a Portland Street Medicine volunteer. In February, Meieran said, she thought of possible scenarios regarding COVID-19 and the area's homeless population.

"The outcome could have been disastrous. It was truly scary, but the city and county and so many volunteers rallied together and worked so hard. There are a lot of amazing groups, but I can't think of any more important than Portland Street Medicine. I think of them putting on whatever PPE they had and going out every day to work on the front lines. They were heroic."

Dawn Mautner, MD, MS, senior health adviser with the Oregon Health Authority COVID-19 response team, noted that people without sheltered housing have less access to hygiene and sanitation facilities, and adequate health care. "They are disproportionately affected during an infectious disease outbreak. That is why the work of community-based organizations such as Portland Street Medicine is so critical in augmenting the local, state and federal efforts to help."

Dr. William Toepper (Dr. Bill) works with a patient (pre-COVID) as Melanie Farnsworth, RN, looks on.

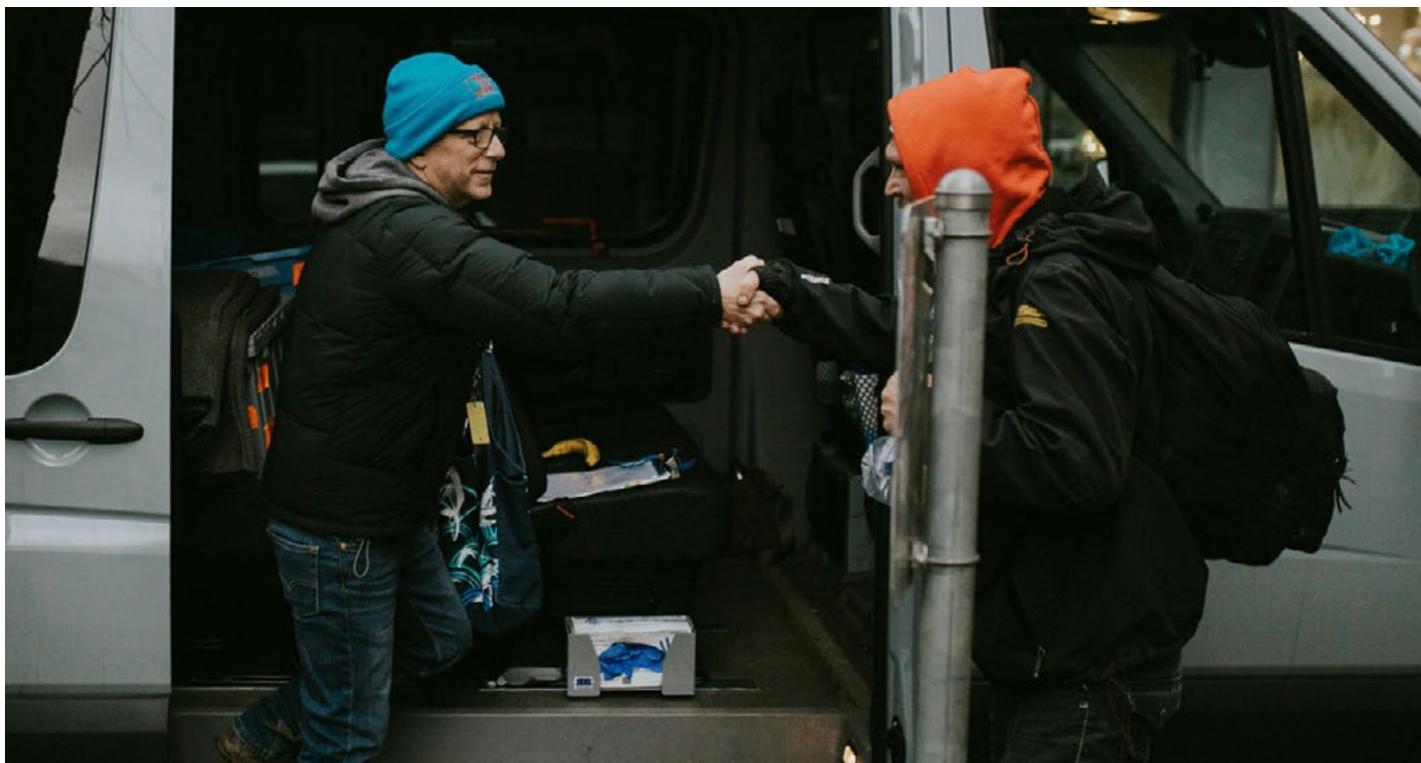
Photos courtesy of Cole Keister



The director of Communicable Disease Programs for Multnomah County, Kim Toevs has worked successfully with Portland Street Medicine previously on issues such as HIV and hepatitis that affect the homeless community.

“There’s fear and a lot of uncertainty among the homeless and some are worried about the possibility of a mass roundup. (Portland Street Medicine) volunteers stay calm and are comforting. They’ve earned trust and that is so important right now.”

Portland Street Medicine Founder **William Toepper, MD**, says that in late February and March the 3-year-old nonprofit shifted its usual health care-outreach focus to one of preventative medicine and education specific to the COVID-19 virus, working closely with city and county officials.



Timely donation of supplies

Fortuitously, Toepper said, Portland Street Medicine received a sizable donation of medical supplies last year, including gloves, gowns and respiratory masks, from the Southwest Community Health Center. The clinic, located in Multnomah Village, served mostly non-English speaking clients for 15 years, closed and transferred most of its patients to Virginia Garcia’s Beaverton Wellness Center. “They donated so much good stuff to us. We had no idea how useful it would be.”

Portland Street Medicine passed out hundreds of homemade, survival-hygiene kits containing toothbrushes and toothpaste, triple antibiotic ointment, masks, socks, soap, sanitizer and other items.

A cardiologist at Providence St. Vincent Medical Center, **Geoffery Wilson, MD**, began volunteering at Portland Street Medicine two years ago, he says, “to have a direct and personal impact among our community’s most vulnerable population.”

As a Portland Street Medicine volunteer working in the midst of a health crisis, Wilson meets patients on their territory. Many he

encounters have had negative experiences and frustration with the “system,” and are initially distant and/or skeptical, he says.

“This has all reaffirmed for me the importance of humility in the health care setting,” Wilson says. He thinks the low incidence of COVID-19 among homeless people is due to a combination of factors. He credits the aggressive, proactive approach spearheaded by Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler and City Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty and county officials.

Beginning in March, Hardesty and Wheeler helped catalyze efforts to provide safe living spaces for the homeless. This included providing 240 motel/hotel rooms for those most at risk, and tents, sleeping bags, blankets and supplies for hundreds of others.

“The city and county worked to create new homeless areas using COVID-19 precautions and also to make the existing homeless camps much safer, with social distancing, hand-washing stations, hygienic supplies and more,” Wilson says.

‘Gentle persistence’

Fellow volunteer **Daniel Skog, MD**, is an ER physician at Providence

Willamette Falls Medical Center in Oregon City, where he began having conversations about the virus with unhoused persons in early February. Skog was also hitting the streets in Portland, working in small groups with other Portland Street Medicine volunteers.

Skog and his colleagues take extreme precautions to decrease cross-contamination risks. For example, Skog changes from street clothes into scrubs before beginning outreach. He vigilantly wipes down all his equipment with anti-viral swabs and dons protective goggles, an N-95 mask and disposable gloves. “I take my mask and goggles off just once, in the middle of my shift, while I am eating, and if there is any patient contact, I also change my clothes.”

After the shift, Skog puts his clothes in a sealed plastic bag for five days before washing them. This is standard procedure; however, if he encounters a patient with even the slightest respiratory symptoms, he takes even more vigorous precautions. Another difficulty Skog strives to overcome is a lack of trust with some homeless individuals. He cited one person he had numerous encounters with that led nowhere. Finally, one day, he managed to have a brief conversation with the person. “As we were walking away, she came running after us, telling us she had a friend she was worried about, and asking us if we’d check up on him as well.”

It turned out, Skog explained, the single opening led to many other successful meetings with homeless persons. “Gentle persistence can break

Dr. William Toepper (Dr. Bill) with a patient.

down deep and stubborn resistance. The time invested in just one person can pay off in building a bridge to a whole group who wouldn’t normally have access to health care.”

Skog is wary of rosy forecasts, as are other physicians. “We’re working at flattening the curve, not eliminating the virus altogether. I’m proud of all Oregonians for respecting the rules and inconveniencing themselves to protect the elderly, immunocompromised and unhoused Oregonians who are at the greatest risk.”

Mautner said it was clear that the outreach of Portland Street Medicine and other volunteer groups thus far has helped reduce the impact of COVID-19 among the region’s homeless population.

“They literally put their boots on the ground, walking the necessary miles to reach people experiencing homelessness, often in difficult-to-access areas, and getting them whatever they needed to protect themselves and stay healthy.”

When asked about the role Portland Street Medicine has played in the COVID-19 crisis, Toepper attested the agency was part of a huge effort, with many players and partners.

“A lot of people worked real hard on this, and I think we may have dodged a bullet, but I’m reluctant to say, ‘Okay, we can relax now.’ It’s easy for people to stay in their tents and houses when it is cold and rainy. Now the weather is getting nice, and people will be tempted to get back to normal, but we’re still vulnerable.” ■

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