

# City deserves kudos for emergency response

*Editorial Board*

*Street Roots*

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Street Roots has been around the block a time or two when it comes to cold weather in the Portland region. We've had vendors die in the cold and have stayed open around the clock for days, sometimes weeks at a time once the weather turns for the worse.

Five years ago, during one of the worst winter storms of the past decade, Portland's homeless community and providers were thrown into chaos, after more than a week of freezing ice and snow that shut the city down. Nonprofits, churches and businesses throughout the city opened their doors 24-7, including Street Roots, to provide a safe and warm place for people sleeping out during the nightmare scenario.

Five years on, Portland has created one of the better emergency preparedness systems around. The former Bureau of Housing and Community Development, now known as the Portland Housing Bureau, and the Portland Office of Emergency Management, developed standard operating procedures and an incident command structure that works with nonprofits, city bureaus, businesses and volunteers. Much of this has come under the leadership of Nick Fish and his drive to make the system better.

In cold-weather situations, organizations and systems shift gears. Homeless providers and people sleeping out work double time to make sure response is adequate and that people on the streets have access to cold-weather gear and shelter. The group also works to educate the general community to know exactly what is available and how to help, ranging from donations all the way to volunteering at a warming center during cold spells.

On the front lines is the Red Cross, 211 info, and a range of outreach workers and homeless providers who are out and about engaging folks. The Red Cross runs a cold-weather center for adults and families, and 211 works long hours on the phones and coordinating information to connect people with essential services. A range of other organizations, including the faith-based community and individual efforts also play a role in the response. Everyone involved should be commended.

Saying that, more than 1,600 individuals sleep on our streets every night and thousands more experience homelessness during the course of the year. It's a sad reality.

While it's easy to feel good about the efforts of city officials when cold weather hits, it by no means lets them or larger government institutions off the hook. We need solutions, such as alternatives to criminalization and revenue streams dedicated to affordable housing.

Without these harm-reduction and long-term solutions, we are shooting ourselves in the foot. Instead of solving homelessness over the course of 10 years or more, we'll be left patting ourselves on the back because we respond to homelessness only when the weather turns cold. It's a remarkable effort, but it's still not good enough. We have a long way to go before we reach the mountaintop.