

# ‘They are for everyone’: How libraries are at the center of solving homelessness in Oregon

Jonathan Williams



A throng of people, some who are homeless, wait for the doors to unlock at Central Library in Portland.

A little more than 20 people wait outside Portland’s Central Library on a clear, brisk Friday morning 15 minutes before it’s supposed to open at 10 a.m. There is a collective sense of anticipation and excitement among those waiting to get in. People are sitting and standing, listening to music and reading, chatting – a man near a bench watches a TV show on his tablet without headphones on for all to hear. As the time neared that the library would open, more people gathered on the front steps. The wrought iron gates barring the entrance to the library

open and some people rush in, nimbly climbing the marble staircase that leads to other rooms in the library. One homeless man rolls in a hand truck loaded to the top with three large plastic crates.

A young woman in her mid-20s sits on a bench on the third floor near the stairwell with a wagon full of sleeping bags, pillows, personal belongs and hygiene products. Her name is Jasmine. She recently became homeless again after a 90-day no cause eviction causing her and her boyfriend to go back on the streets. “When I was first homeless I used to come here a lot,” she said. She says her boyfriend just got a job at a car wash and started this week. Jasmine and her boyfriend are second on a wait list for an apartment. “A friend of ours is letting us borrow this wagon and everything. It’s been really helpful,” she says.

Jasmine and her boyfriend are a part of a burgeoning population of homeless people in Oregon. According to the United States Housing and Urban Development 2016 Annual Homeless Assessment released in November, on a single night in Oregon more than 13,000 people are homeless. In Portland, nearly 3,800 people are homeless, according to a Point in Time head count conducted in 2015. Oregon is second behind California for the highest numbers of unsheltered homeless people – 60.5 percent. As news headlines of homelessness in Portland and across the state blare, libraries across Oregon shine brightly as one of the only public spaces homeless people can go to find services to help them regain stability. But residents in Douglas and now Wallowa counties will soon be without libraries, causing many Oregonians, potentially homeless, to lose services vital to their survival.

Jasmine has used the library’s computers to fill out job applications and to read books. She wishes that the time limit people can be on a computer was longer. She also wishes that the library hours were more consistent. Jasmine knows many homeless people who come to the library to escape the weather, especially if it is raining. “Other businesses will, like, kick out the homeless when they’re just trying to stay dry,” she said.

Vailey Oehlke, director of Multnomah County Libraries, says that some of the people others might think are homeless actually aren’t. Instead, she says, “they’re living in one room, single occupancy living spaces or are living in poverty.”

The library is dominating in size, with high ceilings and giant windows that let in natural light. Its carpet is old but true to the city of Portland with roses interspersed among the green coloring. The library has four pay phones next to its bathrooms on the first floor. Across from

that a bulletin board chock full with fliers for events ranging from tax, citizenship, reading and English classes to a coding workshop, a language exchange program for Spanish speakers, test taking help and a life changes support group.

A man carrying a giant plastic bag slung over his back usually used to recycle beer cans instead shows his clothing and sleeping bag inside it. Many of the homeless people are silently reading, on laptops or their phones, or are using desktop computers or are just enjoying the quiet the library affords them. Stacked neatly on shelves are national and local newspapers, with ones from every city and town in Oregon available for patrons to read. An older, short woman wearing a blue hat with buttons says loudly to a staff member working at a reference desk “It’s just comforting. I love this place!”



Annually, more than 70,650 people use the library's computers.

On the main floor, two men sit next to each other on benches while they use their cell phones that are being charged using the electrical outlet by the benches. A man sitting on a bench outside one of the reading rooms on the second floor appeared to be crying in reflection. A large group of homeless people all hang out in the back of the library on the second floor – many crates and bags surround them at the tables they occupy.

Oehlke says that homeless people can get a library card as long as they can produce an address, whether it's a PO box or the address of the shelter where they are staying. She maintains that homeless people “want access to the same things everyone else wants: Internet, Facebook, jobs, a quiet place to sit and read the newspaper.” She says that most homeless people choose to use the library to charge their electronic devices as well as communicating with their friends and family. Oehlke said that many use the library to stay on top of news as well as to find places to live and jobs.

[homeless people] “want access to the same things everyone else wants: Internet, Facebook, jobs, a quiet place to sit and read the newspaper.”- Vailey Oehlke, director Multnomah County Libraries

A short man with a zip up vest and beanie hat sits at one of the large, long tables in a reading room scanning the New York Times. His name is Alfred. A large backpack along with other bags sit next to him at the table. He's lived in other cities and states like Chicago, Salt Lake City and Arizona. He says that he tries to come to the library every day to read the newspaper. He likes the quiet the library provides but was unhappy with how many people he notices who seem to come to the library drunk.



Jon Williams  
How the homeless use pu...  
SOUNDCLOUD  
Share  
5:22  
9

Cookie policy


Oehlke says that the library does not allow people to sleep in it.

Susan Voss-Rothmeier, the library's Crisis Worker, is a trained social worker who helps connect between seven and eight and as many as 15 homeless people per day to the services they need. She helps people get into shelters, low-cost housing, medical and mental health clinics, as well as with getting a free phone, food stamps and free meals in Portland. She says

that some of the people she helps have been homeless for years and years while others are newly homeless. When she's not seeing someone, Voss-Rothmeier will quietly walk around the library and gently approach people who might need help. There are at least 50 sets of cards spread throughout the library that detail the services she can provide. Anyone who reads one of the cards can go up to a staff member who will call the manager who then contacts Voss-Rothmeier that someone needs to see her.

Voss-Rothmeier recalled helping an older woman who was physically disabled and newly homeless and unable to function on the streets. She was able to connect her to a senior living program and now has some mental health services and is also applying for Social Security. She also remembered helping a man last fall who came to Portland from California and was battling severe alcohol issues. She said that he didn't have the Oregon health plan so she worked to get his insurance transferred over and got him into a detox program. She later got him into case management and they helped him with drug treatment and housing. "There are those who have many, many issues that take several steps that I may work with sort of longer term over months to get them settled," she said. But more often than not, Voss-Rothmeier is mainly helping refer people to other services and agencies that can help them.

She says that 20 percent of the people she has worked with are between 18 and 20 while 20 percent are 55 or older or a senior citizen. She says that mainly the people she works with are between 20 and 50 years old.

  
"People use this really as like a day center because sometimes you can get more than you can at other places."- Susan Voss-Rothmeier, Central Library crisis worker

Voss-Rothmeier says that the library has things that even the Portland Transitions Project (TPI) isn't able to offer. "People use this really as like a day center because sometimes you can get more than you can at other places. It does a lot for people," she said. "I find it an honor to know people who most of society might not take the chance to know." She says she always felt honored being someone people can open up to about things they might not feel comfortable opening up about with others. "To be that person for somebody and to help them figure out the steps like how are you going to move out of that, it's just rewarding to do that with people."

Oehlke also says that the library hosts a Coffee and Conversation session every other Wednesday from noon-1 p.m. where leaders at the library, including Voss-Rothmeier, talk with homeless people about what they find helpful at the library and what they'd like to see added or changed. Oehlke says that most homeless people in Portland tend to go to Central library as opposed to other branches because it has its own Max stop and is the largest library. Oehlke says that no matter someone's housing situation or appearance, the library welcomes everyone. "[Homeless people] are using the library for the same reasons as everyone else," she said. She also said that because of Voss-Rothmeier's work at the library, success stories of homeless people getting the help they need are happening daily. In 2016 alone, Voss-Rothmeier helped connect more than 650 homeless people to the services they need.

Libraries across the country in cities like Denver, San Francisco and New York City have also found innovative ways similar to the programs happening at Central Library to meet the needs of homeless people.

With 18 branches, the largest in Oregon, Multnomah County Libraries receives more than \$72 million from the county and district and only a little more than \$100,000 from the state. Annually, more than 900,000 people use the public internet computers in the libraries, according to Oregon Public Library data.

At Northwest Library in Portland, Shauna, a staff member at the small neighborhood library, estimates that 10 to 20 homeless people use the library daily. She says that she interacts with a homeless person at that library at least 10 times a day. She says that the library is mostly equipped to help homeless people, but that people suffering from mental illness, who she notes are not always homeless, do present a challenge to library staff. "People aren't allowed to sleep in the library and sometimes that's what they want. I don't necessarily wish that the library could offer a place for people to sleep but I wish that the city could offer people a place to sleep," she said. Discussions of turning the giant Terminal One building into a shelter ended last summer as many thought the warehouse in Portland too big and ill equipped to house people. Newly elected Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler has vowed to focus on housing the homeless.

\*\*\*

Even at a small, private liberal arts college like Linfield College in McMinnville, libraries still experience patrons who are homeless. Bob, a short man with an unshaved face and greasy

hair, comes into the library daily. Exhausted, he tends to stay in the same individual study room each time he comes in to charge his phone and laptop. He drives a silver GMC Yukon and parks it in the back of the Albertsons parking lot near the library. When he opens the back doors of the SUV one can see the sheer amount of possessions in it. Bob was recently cited as trespassing when he got back into the library after regular hours, according to library director Susan Barnes Whyte.

Barnes Whyte says that the library has not had many homeless people use it this year. She remembers a family – a grandmother, mother and son a few years ago who were homeless and using the library to wash up in the bathrooms. She also said that she communicates with McMinnville Public Library director Jenny Berg on homeless people who are particularly challenging. Barnes Whyte says that library staff does not wake people if they are taking a nap. She also said that Linfield's library is one of the few private college libraries that keeps itself open to the public. Library staff and student workers are trained to help people apply for jobs and craft resumes. Non-college students can use the library's computers for up to an hour and can use the library until 9 p.m.

Barnes Whyte noted the role public libraries are playing in becoming a haven for homeless people and recent immigrants to the U.S. "They are a cornerstone for the community and for those less fortunate to help them with their lives and I think that's a primary mission for all libraries," she said. Barnes Whyte says that part of a public library's mission is to serve the entire community and not decide who can come in and who cannot. She mentioned the closing of libraries in Wallowa County and how devastating that is to those communities. "In rural communities, children, recent immigrants, older people – they all need lots of services that the public libraries give them. It's not just about books and movies – it's about having a place to go and get help for all kinds of social services. We become a community center," she said.

**██████████**

**“In rural communities, children, recent immigrants, older people – they all need lots of services that the public libraries give them. It's not just about books and movies – it's about having a place to go and get help for all kinds of social services. We become a community center.”**

**-Susan Barnes Whyte, Linfield College library director**

\*\*\*

At the McMinnville Public Library, a throng of a little more than 10 people waits outside for the doors to open on a bright and blustery Sunday morning. Those waiting to enter the building range from young adults to middle aged to senior citizens. Some are homeless and clutch their belongings in their hands. “[The library] is a place to go for everyone. You don’t have to buy anything. It is the only space like that. I think it’s the only space like that anywhere,” Berg said.



The McMinnville Public Library.

As a woman from inside unlocks the automatic sliding doors to the library the small crowd quickly files in and disperses. Some climb the stairs to the second floor and rush to use one of the 16 desktop computers that are free for anyone to use. Others start browsing the stacks or looking for an inviting place to sit down. One man sat in a chair and just looked outside.

While going to the library might seem like a pastime to some, for homeless people it is a vital resource in their everyday life. “Being able to get out of the weather is a major draw for homeless people to come in,” Berg said. “It’s warm in the winter and cool in the summer. We’ll have people in the morning come in and just sit all day.” Berg mentioned that during a rain



and windstorm that swept the Willamette Valley in early April many homeless people eagerly waited outside the library to seek warm and dry shelter. Recent Yamhill County statistics say that more than 900 McMinnville residents are considered homeless. The library is also popular among people without a permanent home because of its public bathrooms and Wi-Fi that anyone can use.

The library serves a city population of more than 33,000 and receives more than \$1 million in funding from the city and its taxpayers. The library only receives a little more than \$5,000 from the state. According to Oregon Public Library data, more than 70,500 people use the public internet computers at the library annually.

Berg says the computers along with the library's collection of books and periodicals are major draws for homeless people to come to the library. She said that if a person cannot produce a home address they cannot get a library card. She also said that if homeless people want to mark their page in a book that they are reading they can do that and the staff will keep the book behind the desk until they come in next.

She recalled a recent success story of a woman who she says came in every single day for months, was well kept and used the Internet all day. Vicky Heis-Felix had been homeless for two and a half years. "All the librarians, I know them all by name, I love them and they have helped me anytime I needed anything." In a video explaining her success story, she stated that she has a "phone phobia" and that the librarians helped her email back and forth with her lawyer in regards to her disability claim. "Without the librarians to give me extra time and to help me send or print or whatever – I couldn't do it."

In the video, she said that after struggling for four years and not having anything she was able to get settlements. Berg said that He is-Felix was able to get \$40,000 back and managed to move to California and buy a mobile home. "I am so, so grateful to have the library to come to and it's like home. They're like family – the librarians all of them are just wonderful," Heis-Felix said.

**██████████**

**“Everyone gets the same service. I think that’s one of the big things about library service: all are welcome.” -Jenny Berg, McMinnville Public Library director**

Berg stated that she doesn't see the library offering more to the homeless than any other person. "Everyone gets the same service. I think that's one of the big things about library service: all are welcome." Berg estimates that at least half a dozen or more homeless people come in every day to use the library's services. Berg said that it can also be difficult to identify who is and is not homeless. "I know we have had people who six months in will then tell us that they are homeless and we wouldn't have had any idea – they're living in their car or something but they are keeping themselves up." Berg also mentioned that there are people who may appear to be homeless but actually are not.

Even on a Sunday afternoon the library is bustling. Wander through the stacks and various rooms in the library and you'll begin to notice the multitude of patrons who use the library. One woman who is homeless sits in a chair shaking and watches people walk by. Berg noted that one complaint the library has had an issue with in the last year is odors coming from homeless people who come into the library. On this Sunday too, a particularly pungent smell fills the silent reading room. Berg says that the library can tell patrons who carry a strong odor with them to shower at the community center. She says installing diffuser scents throughout the library has been one of the most effective ways the library has been able to combat the smell.

Berg also mentioned that the library occasionally has instances where staff does have to call authorities. She said the library has had issues with people with substance abuse problems, and if they are drunk and disorderly staff will call the police. Often, homeless people come to the library and may fall asleep. Berg says that the official policy of the library is to not allow sleeping "but if people are sitting upright and not causing a disturbance, we do not wake them."

The library offers one-on-one training sessions with a librarian where they can help someone make a Facebook page, use email, search the library catalog, work on a resume or apply for a job. The library also has tax service volunteers that come in to help people. "There are lots of services that the library provides for people that don't have it all," Berg said.

Berg also recognized the delicate situation of having a lot of homeless people in the library potentially puts her in. "It's a very tough balance to walk ... I want the community support, I want the community's tax dollars, I want the community to keep coming in and using the library, but if the library feels unsafe or is unwelcoming to most people then that puts the library in a very tough situation," she said. She also doesn't necessarily see the library as being

the central answer to solving homelessness. “It’s not a solution by any means, but it is a place to be. It is a place for people to just be,” she said.



Jon Williams  
How libraries in Oregon a...  
SOUNDCLOUD  
Share  
6:46  
2  
Cookie policy

\*\*\*



A homeless person sleeps outside the abandoned Waldorf Hotel in Astoria, Oregon. The hotel is directly adjacent to the Astoria Public Library and is in the process of being turned into 40 units of lower income housing.

The low, red and blue colored lawn chair style cushioned chairs at the Astoria Public Library on the main floor are often occupied all throughout the day. Some people are reading while others are just sitting and enjoying the quiet space. The six desktop computers next to the chairs are constantly occupied. “For me a library is free and you come in. You don’t have to be

reading. If you are using the space and following the library usage policy, who I am to say you can't be here. I target behavior not status," said Astoria library director Jimmy Pearson. He says that Astoria has a fairly large homeless population but that most of them are finding their way elsewhere because of the weather. "When the Warming Center was open we would have some that would be in here pretty much all day," Pearson said. The Warming Center in Astoria is only a block away from the library in the basement of the First United Methodist Church. The center provides overnight shelter for homeless people in the winter and is also open the rest of year during the day.

**████████████████████**

**“For me a library is free and you come in. You don't have to be reading. If you are using the space and following the library usage policy, who I am to say you can't be here. I target behavior not status.” -Jimmy Pearson, director, Astoria Public Library**

Pearson takes the library's no sleeping policy seriously. "People think it's harsh to say that you can't sleep in library – well there's a safety side. We don't know if you're sleeping or if you've passed out, you've had a stroke." He said its sometimes obvious that people been drinking and smell.

Pearson estimates that on any given day there might be two to 10 homeless people who come in to the library. He said that many come in to charge their electronics, specifically their cellphone. "That to me maintains their dignity and communication they might have with family or other people," Pearson said.

He also noted that the library does require people to produce an address in order to get a library card. At Denver Public Library, where Pearson previously worked, the library would issue library cards to homeless people if they produced a letter from a shelter. "Here that's a little bit wonkish because they don't have a shelter," he said. "If someone checked out three books, anybody, those three books are gone. You start looking at things a little differently when the money isn't coming from a large system," Pearson said.

The library receives more than \$485,500 from the city while only a little more than a \$1,000 from the state annually. With a city population of just under 10,000 people, 682 people in

Clatsop County were counted homeless during the state's Point in Time count in 2015. Oregon Public Library data says that more than 9,500 people use the public internet computers at the library annually. Pearson says that anyone can use the computers without a library card and can instead use a guest pass.

Directly adjacent to the library is the abandoned Waldorf Hotel. Recently the building has been purchased by a non-profit based in Portland that plans to turn the building into 40 units of lower-income housing.

Opened in 1966, Astoria's library has been a contentious topic among city residents. For more than 10 years the city has explored options of building a new multimillion-dollar library or renovating the current one. The City Council ultimately turned down plans for a new library in favor of a renovation due to lack of public support to fund the cost of building a new library. Though the library is not often crowded and is quiet, currently only able-bodied people can access books from the mezzanine since it does not have an elevator.



Patrons sit and read and browse the stacks at the Astoria Public Library.

Pearson recognizes that many members of the community are tired of the debate over what to do with the library. Pearson and his staff have been working to make small changes to improve

the library since he became the director including updating the library's lighting – something patron's have been wanting changed. He said that through the renovation he hopes to see study rooms added for teens and adults to use a quiet place to work or meet with friends.

The library is also deeply rooted in the history of Astoria. The entire basement of it is filled with memorabilia, art, books from the nineteenth century, old catalog ledgers and copies of the Daily Astorian that date back to 1873.

While Pearson cares deeply about those affected by homelessness, he says he isn't the type to walk up to someone and tell them to go get some services. He says that he's noticed some homeless people he knows are veterans and makes sure that fliers with local services on them are on display for people who walk by them. "In a rural economy – we're two hours to a major city – so our services are limited to what we can offer," Pearson said.

Pearson recalled a time recently on the weekend when his staff had to call the police because a young man who was homeless and off his medication was having an issue with someone he knew in the library. "If people are on medication and then they have problems or they can't get it or access it or they go off of it, it could cause really huge mood swings." Pearson said that the police did have to come in and arrest the man but questioned where he can get help to make sure he gets the medication he needs.

\*\*\*

It's a warm, breezy day and the sun's rays beat down on the street outside the Eugene Public Library while Jim, a homeless Air Force veteran of the Vietnam War, sits outside on a rock next to a statue holding a sign and asking passersby for spare change.

Behind him towers the library with its tall windows, allowing for plenty of natural light. It's circular atrium with a spiraling staircase that snakes up the side of the wall with openings on each floor heightens the building's modern, urban design. At 3 p.m. on a Friday the library is packed. Many people are using the wall power outlets. The desktop computers and labs are all being used – more than 210,000 people use them yearly. Security guards walk around frequently. More than 3,000 people use the libraries in Eugene every day, according to library director Connie Bennett. Weekly, the library experiences between one and 6 instances where people are excluded or asked to leave for not following library policy



The Eugene Public Library on a warm Friday in April.

The library sits directly across the street from Lane Community College and the Eugene Station transit center. Many police officers can be seen patrolling the square outside.

In some ways, the library feels more like a shelter because of all the bags, luggage, backpacks and sleeping bags. Many seem to carry their lives with them. People look like they are prepared to go to war with their military-sized backpacks or are packed for a long backpacking trip. Bennett says that the library does not have a limit on what people can bring into the library, although whatever is brought in can't smell or block aisles and must be kept with the owner of it.

“Winter has been difficult not just at libraries. There has been a recognizable level of stress because of national politics and an uptick incidents,” Bennett said. She mentioned that the library works to “meet people where they are” and that her staff is trained to work with people compassionately.

Jim uses the library every other day or so to read and plug in his smart phone so he can watch TV late at night. He says he has three ex-wives, five kids and 15 grandchildren. “I have a master’s and two doctorates, so here I am,” he said.

He says that as a homeless person, he likes the library because it has a restroom. "Coffee is reasonable. I like certain books – the "Reacher" series – I've read all those here," he says. Jim hasn't used the computers in the library yet because he says he can do everything on his phone.

Bennett says that homeless people can get a library card without ID or a permanent address if they get a letter from a local homeless service provider stating that they are currently camping within city limits. Bennett recalls when the city used to have a day where social service groups and the library would gather to help the homeless. The library would issue library cards to homeless people and she remembers that people who got a homeless library card were able to later report an actual physical address.

Jim wishes the library was open until midnight or when the buses stop in Eugene. "Somewhere along there, especially on rainy nights and winter nights." He also said that he wishes the library allowed people to sit in the chairs longer. "Every 30 minutes they want you to move. All you do is get up and move to the next chair – that's crazy, you know," Jim said. Bennett said that the library recently did a study of space use in the building and found that 20 chairs in the building were occupied by the same person for five hours or more per day twice a week. Bennett also said that the library does not allow people to sleep in it or bathe in its restrooms. She hopes that people who see homeless people using the library remember that "people are people. The library is a resource we provide for people who use it. We don't categorize, we meet people where they are," Bennett said.



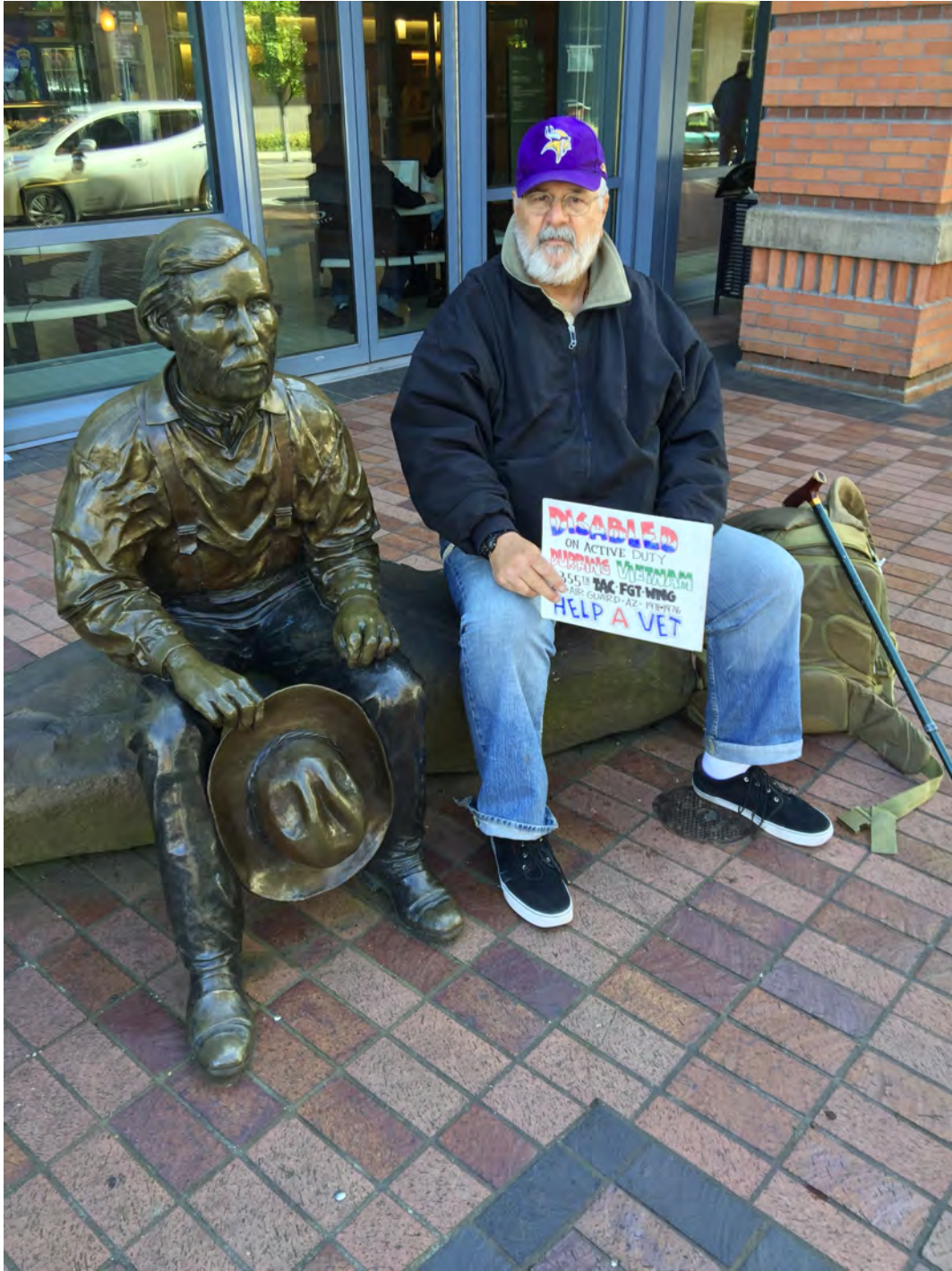


Stacks in the Eugene Public Library.

Jim says that he is looking for an apartment through Veterans Affairs and through St. Vincent de Paul. Jim said that he has had pancreatic cancer, a heart attack, emphysema and osteoarthritis in his knee and back. "I'm pretty beat up for 67 almost 68," he said. He also complained that it didn't seem like the people who were supposed to help him were in any hurry to do so. "I don't do illegal drugs, I don't drink alcohol very often – I'm not drunk, I don't smoke cigarettes ... somebody who is in between – there's no helping or very little," he said. Jim said that although the people who work at the library are friendly, they are not very helpful to him.

Social services fliers advertising shelters, services for veterans, places to get ID, medical help, mental health and drug problems, voter registration forms, drivers license manuals and places to get food can be found throughout the library. Posters of a book talk with an author about mental health awareness, intro to computers, conversational English, a quartet concert in the library and dancing lessons can also be found posted on walls. "The library offers 1,500 programs per year focused on skills most useful for someone struggling with homelessness," Bennett said. She also mentioned that the library has tax aids available for people January-April.

Jim says he is limited to \$800 a month from Social Security retirement. He said that an attorney has taken his case for a VA claim that dates back 40 years ago to when he was in the Air Force. Jim said he was sexually sodomized by a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force when he was 21 years old. "I've been up and down in relationships all of my life because of it." "There were times in my life where I was on the street, off the street, on the street, off the street – mediocre jobs pretty much. I was self-employed in many cases," he said.



Jim, a homeless veteran who served in the Air Force during the Vietnam War, sits outside the Eugene Public Library.

Bennett said that on Fridays the library hosts a Community Court where a judge and attorney are present and courts process fairly low level infractions for homeless people. After they are processed a social worker will help the homeless person identify what they need help with. The social worker can help them get an ID, connect them with a drug and alcohol treatment

center, a homeless shelter and places that provide food for homeless people in Lane County. Bennett also noted that homeless people don't have to have an infraction to participate. She also understands how challenging it can be for the homeless to navigate regular courts. Bennett says the library is able to offer the program because of a federal grant.

Asked to take a photo Jim replies: "You bet, I'm not afraid of myself," with honest, transcendent diction and confidence.

At 5:54 p.m. a guard announces to those sitting at the tables near the Novella coffee stand that he is locking the doors and that they need to gather their things. A "Read and Return" wire book rack sits in the lobby. Anyone can borrow the books and they don't need a library card to take one.

Bennett said that the Eugene City Council is actively looking at a way to support a day shelter. She also said that funding for the library itself is almost exclusively local. She said that funding for libraries "depends on the wealth and beliefs of locals and the community." The library serves a city population of 163,400 with a homeless population 1,451, according to Lane County's 2016 Annual Homeless Point in Time count. The library receives most of its funding from the city - \$10 million while getting only \$19,295 from the state.

While the Douglas and Wallowa county libraries begin to close, many others across the state are meeting homeless people where they are and are helping them regain their life. Safe public spaces are increasingly hard to come by and public libraries offer everyone a place to be. As Berg says, "When you get all levels of people together and all types of people that some of the hope gathers together and helps some of those people feel a little less hopeless," Berg said.

*\*All photos by Jonathan Williams*

### A Close Encounter

During my observation and interviews at Eugene Public Library I used the restroom on the second floor of the building. The lone urinal in the small bathroom was being used so I proceeded to use the stall instead. After just closing the stall door behind me I heard someone come into the bathroom raving mad. The man was yelling but I could not distinguish what he was saying – only that he was infuriated. He began banging on the stall door questioning why I wasn't answering him. I told him I would be right out. He kept yelling, becoming even more out of sorts. As I opened the stall door to come out I see him and he was at least four heads taller than me and was wearing dark sunglasses. He said that his boots and gloves were left in that stall. I told him I didn't see them in there. He became totally enraged. It was also clear that he was completely devastated that he lost his boots and gloves or that someone stole them. He stormed out of the bathroom, yelling "Welcome to the library!" before exiting. Shaken, the other man in the bathroom asked me if I knew him. I said I did not. He told me he's a regular and could barely walk up the steps because of how inebriated he was.