

Invest in People (Alan Evans - remarks at n4safe meeting 9/2/2026)

Good evening.

Before I talk about homelessness, I want to acknowledge the people in this room.

Many of you have spent **six years or more investing your own time, talent, energy, and physical presence** in keeping this neighborhood clean and safe.

You've lived alongside the challenges surrounding the River District Navigation Center—the RDNC.

And you've seen things most people discussing homelessness from a conference room never experience.

You've seen people who need much more than a bed.

You've witnessed people in the deepest stages of addiction, alcohol dependency, and mental-health crises.

You've dealt with assaults and theft.

You've seen human waste on your streets and sidewalks.

You've dealt with fires, prostitution, public drug use, and behavior that has made people feel unsafe in their own neighborhood.

Those experiences are real.

And acknowledging them does not mean we lack compassion for people experiencing homelessness.

We can have compassion for the person in crisis and compassion for the neighborhood experiencing the consequences of that crisis.

Those two things are not mutually exclusive.

In fact, I believe any successful solution has to accomplish both.

A Bed Is the Beginning—Not the Solution

When we talk about homelessness, we often talk about numbers.

How many people are on the streets?

How many beds do we need?

How many shelters should we build?

How much money should government spend?

Those numbers matter.

But I believe we've made a mistake when we begin treating **the bed itself as the outcome.**

A bed is important.

A safe place to sleep can be the first step toward changing someone's life.

But for someone struggling with severe addiction, alcoholism, untreated behavioral-health issues, unemployment, or years of trauma and instability—

a bed alone does not solve the problem.

It's the starting line.

What happens **after someone gets that bed** is what matters.

We Have to Invest in the Person

That's where I believe models like Helping Hands and the Bybee Lakes Hope Center deserve serious consideration.

The philosophy is different.

We aren't simply asking:

“Where can this person sleep tonight?”

We're asking:

“What will it take for this person to eventually not need this bed?”

That means recovery.

It means drug and alcohol treatment when needed.

It means behavioral and physical healthcare.

It means dental care.

It means case management.

It means employment.

It means volunteerism and reconnecting with community.

It means learning—or relearning—the responsibilities that come with independent living.

And when people are able, it can mean contributing toward the cost of their room.

Most importantly, it means **accountability**.

Expectations matter.

Choices have consequences.

Compassion does not require us to abandon standards.

In fact, sometimes the most compassionate thing we can do is believe that someone is capable of meeting them.

Managing Homelessness Versus Leaving Homelessness

Low-barrier shelters have a role in an emergency-response system.

There are moments when getting someone safely off the street has to come first.

But emergency shelter cannot become the final destination.

After years of watching what has happened around RDNC and other low-barrier facilities, I think Portland needs to ask a difficult question:

Are we measuring success by how many people we accommodate in homelessness—or by how many people we help move beyond it?

Because those are very different things.

If we spend millions of dollars providing shelter but don't create meaningful pathways toward recovery, employment, responsibility, and sustainable housing, we risk building an expensive system that manages homelessness instead of reducing it.

Some people call that the “**homeless industrial complex.**”

Whatever terminology we use, the concern deserves to be taken seriously:

Our system should never have a financial incentive to perpetually manage people in homelessness.

Its incentive should be to help people succeed their way out of it.

Doing Nothing Isn't Free

Taxpayers should also understand something important.

Failure is expensive.

When someone remains chronically homeless and in crisis, communities continue paying.

Emergency rooms.

Police.

Fire and emergency response.

Jails.

Behavioral-health interventions.

Cleanup.

Property damage.

And repeated encounters with systems that stabilize someone temporarily without changing what happens tomorrow.

Neighbors pay another price.

Businesses pay another price.

Families pay another price.

And, most importantly, the individual trapped in that cycle pays an enormous human price.

So the choice isn't between spending money and spending nothing.

We're already spending the money.

The question is whether we're spending it in ways that change outcomes.

Accountability Applies to Providers Too

And accountability cannot only apply to participants.

It must apply to organizations like ours.

Government, taxpayers, foundations, and donors should ask us:

How many people did you serve?

What did it cost?

How many entered recovery?

How many found employment?

How many moved into sustainable housing?

How many remained housed?

How much did each successful outcome cost?

And what did the community receive for every dollar invested?

If Helping Hands can't answer those questions, you should challenge us.

If Bybee Lakes can't answer them, challenge them.

And if a government-funded shelter can't answer them, challenge that shelter too.

Fund what works.

Measure it.

Compare it.

Improve it.

And stop funding approaches simply because that's how we've always done things.

The Opportunity at RDNC

That's also why I'm interested in having a serious conversation about the future of the **RDNC site and its large green structure** and whether there is an opportunity for that asset to become part of the Bybee Lakes Hope Center model.

This shouldn't simply be about moving a building.

It should be about asking:

What model should operate inside that building?

Imagine taking an existing shelter asset and connecting it to a system built around recovery, healthcare, employment, volunteerism, personal responsibility, accountability, and ultimately sustainable housing.

Instead of simply asking how many people we can put under a roof, ask:

How many lives can we help change under that roof?

That's the conversation I believe Portland should be having.

Compassion and Accountability Belong Together

For too long, we've sometimes been told we have to choose.

Compassion or accountability.

Housing or recovery.

Helping people experiencing homelessness or protecting neighborhoods.

I reject those choices.

We can do both.

We can love people enough to help them and respect them enough to expect something from them.

We can provide shelter while expecting progress.

We can support recovery while establishing boundaries.

We can protect vulnerable people while also protecting neighborhoods.

And we can spend public money while demanding measurable results.

I've Seen What People Can Do

At Helping Hands, I've seen what happens when people are given opportunity, structure, support, and accountability.

A person's past does not have to determine their future.

Someone who once needed everything from their community can eventually become the employee, neighbor, parent, volunteer, mentor, and taxpayer giving something back to that community.

That's the return on investment we should be pursuing.

Not another night of homelessness successfully managed.

Another human being successfully moving beyond homelessness.

Our Choice

Portland—and Oregon—has a choice.

We can continue spending enormous amounts of money reacting to homelessness.

Or we can invest in people.

Give people safety.

Connect them with treatment.

Address healthcare.

Help them find employment.

Expect participation.

Build responsibility.

Create consequences when expectations aren't met.

Help people move toward sustainable housing.

And measure the results.

There is no single organization that will solve homelessness.

Helping Hands doesn't have every answer.

Bybee Lakes doesn't have every answer.

Government doesn't have every answer.

But I believe we know enough to recognize one fundamental truth:

**A BED SHOULD BE THE BEGINNING
OF THE JOURNEY, NOT THE END OF
OUR EXPECTATIONS.**

Let's stop measuring success simply by how many people we shelter.

Let's measure how many people **no longer need us.**

Invest in recovery.

Invest in employment.

Invest in accountability.

Invest in neighborhoods.

Invest in measurable outcomes.

But above all—

Invest in people.

Because when we do that well, we're not simply managing homelessness.

We're creating a pathway out of it.

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Helping Hands Reentry Outreach Centers

*Serving the Homeless in Clatsop, Tillamook, Yamhill, Lincoln,
& Multnomah Counties*