

Untouchables in Oregon

A separate human reality is denied in Oregon. There are many thousands of people whose existence is primarily illegal. They are the untouchables.

To begin with, there is no place for these citizens to legally be. When they got broke, they lost their housing. Often disability drove them into poverty. With no money, we have no permanent status in Oregon. So it is basically illegal to be a broke, disabled person in this state.

A short first line of defense is to live in your vehicle. There is however, no legal place to park a vehicle you live in, if you have no money. Oregonians can move their car if they have gas. Some places you can stay for a day or two if you don't get noticed. When officials find that your car is in an illegal place, the vehicle is impounded. With no money, many lose the last little bit of shelter that belongs to them.

There is no sheltered dry place to legally spend the night. It is even illegal to sleep out in the rain, snow, or storm.

Nobody is responsible for sheltering broke disabled people in Oregon. The very rare and limited emergency shelters have many limits that do not meet the needs of thousands of broke disabled Oregonians.

There is a safety net for impoverished disabled people, called Social Security Disability or SSI. It is hard for broke disabled people to find where to apply. When they do apply to the do-nothing Bush administration, the federal government treats them as antagonists and withholds any payment for over a year, and more often, for several years. People making applications generally require a private attorney to eventually get the needed assistance. Many disabled veterans are finding the same conditions.

A little help is available, federal financing through a state office, the U.S. Food Stamp Program, offers food vouchers for up to \$162 a month. Of course, these disabled people are homeless and have no storage, nor cooking facilities. If they find a site to camp, or hide food, these places are raided by police who confiscate everything.

Untouchables describes the bottom rung on the long homeless ladder in Oregon.

Without charities these skinny, weathered disabled Oregonians would soon starve. Charities often supply meager clothes, bedding, and food that are

soon lost because of the impermanent status of these men and women. Teen children uncared for by their parents have no government assistance.

Most of the homeless are not "untouchables". They have some income and some available services. They may be waiting for "low income" housing. They are on the second step of homelessness. They are a larger, and more visible group of thousands of disabled homeless population are the mentally ill and the substance abusers many who have a small amount of money but can not manage their lives nor stay in paid shelters. Underfunded agencies do not leave these people without services like the untouchable disabled.

An even higher rung on the ladder are the employed homeless.

When Oregon cut 145,000 low income disabled people from the Oregon Health Plan, it is estimated that 30,000 died, and thousands of others were driven out of state. At the same time, the state safety net, an approximately \$400 a month payment was ended for over 3,000 impoverished disabled persons, and never re-instated.

The terrible cuts were made because the state could not increase the tax revenue pie. Money from outside the state lobbied the voters with false information on the nature of the need for tax increases at the top or corporate level. They won the votes of many who suffer the loss.

Don't look elsewhere in the world for untouchables to help, for refugees, or for people who need to be sheltered from harsh weather. Oregon is not dealing with poverty right here.

The author is a retired MSW social worker, who volunteers once a week to help the poor who request assistance from First Christian Church in Eugene.

Jerry Smith
5041 Saxon Way
Eugene, Or 97405
686-6193
jerryjane@comcast.net