

JCRC-led United in Spirit interfaith coalition convenes summit on homelessness

Over a year ago, the Federation's Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) spearheaded the establishment of a broad-based interfaith coalition called United in Spirit. For the past several months, the coalition, which has Jewish, Christian and Muslim members, has been meeting with elected officials, non-profits and business groups ("stakeholders") to discuss the growing problem of chronic homelessness as well as other ongoing problems plaguing Portland.

It became clear after 18 hours of such meetings that though these stakeholders were making efforts to address the homeless problem, they were not necessarily collaborating with one another and were often working in silos, even pointing fingers at one another. For these reasons, little progress was being made. Our coalition decided therefore that the time had come to invite all of the stakeholders to an emergency summit on homelessness.

That 3-hour summit was held on October 4 at Congregation Beth Israel with the necessary COVID protocols, and was attended by Mayor Ted Wheeler, Portland City Commissioner Dan Ryan, Metro President Lynn Peterson, Multnomah County Commissioner Sharon Meieran, Deputy Police Chief Mike Frome, officials from Central City Concern, Bybee Lakes Hope Center, HereTogether, and the Portland Business Alliance, as well as members of United in Spirit. It was the first time that these stakeholders had all gathered around one table.

In opening remarks, Bob Horenstein, Director of Community Relations and Public Affairs, set the tone for the summit: *"As faith-based organizations, we regard homelessness as a moral tragedy requiring urgent attention. Our shared goal as a united group of diverse organizations is to advocate for and support the civic and community collaboration and integration necessary to help Portland end this humanitarian crisis in our own backyard...We are concerned that there does not appear to be a common roadmap to effectively address the problem...As United in Spirit, we are ready to lend a hand to support those political and civic leaders, agencies and groups willing to collaborate on the most equitable and effective solutions."*

Though it was obvious at the summit that political leaders and civic organizations are taking different approaches to addressing the problem, there appears to be a common understanding among those who spoke:

- Efforts are siloed as too many "stakeholders" are working independently of each other.
- There needs to be better coordination among elected officials, organizations and volunteer groups all trying to help the homeless.
- There's a need for better data collection regarding the actual numbers of homeless living on the street (one alarming estimate is 7,000 in Multnomah County) and the availability of shelter beds and other alternatives.
- The public needs more information about positive outcomes from efforts underway to address homelessness.

- We must collectively define what it means to have a “compassionate response” to the problem.
- The energy of the community must be harnessed ***to solve a community problem.***

The summit was an important first step—but only a first step—in creating a synergy around efforts to solve Portland’s homeless problem. Our coalition is hopeful that a follow-up meeting will lead to a process for developing a comprehensive plan with full collaboration between our political leaders, non-profit agencies, business, and the faith communities.

To learn more about United in Spirit, go to unitedinspirit.me