**Headline:** How Portland’s Activists Are Bringing Mutual Aid to the Homeless

**Teaser:** Mutual aid offers a route to directly help people living outside, and potentially save lives through the winter months.

By April M. Short

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**[Article Body:]**

Steven Stroud says when he was released from prison in 2020, where he’d wound up due to becoming addicted to doctor-prescribed opioids and eventually heroin, the Portland, Oregon, streets where he grew up had changed. The pandemic had shut down most of the already sparse jobs he would have potentially been able to pursue, and he ended up without work or a place to live.

Stroud spoke in an [interview with Greg Bennick posted on SoundCloud](https://soundcloud.com/gregbennick/interview-with-steven-stroud/s-x4XDi5PUx8r?fbclid=IwAR0S87m2pF-ZtcMQgIdPKejNF3Q8pcsMP8iVO7LJkFvmPQSFXQS3dDSKPa8) in November 2021 about how people living on the streets in Portland now had to contend with a near-constant militarized police presence, which developed in response to the city’s Black Lives Matter protests (Note: the interview also details Stroud’s youth as a skinhead, and how he eventually left this hate-filled existence behind and spent a period of time speaking out and educating people against white supremacist groups). Stroud shares in the interview that he met Bennick when a few people walking past noticed him and handed him a sandwich. These were volunteers with the Portland Mutual Aid Network ([PMAN](https://portlandmutualaidnetwork.com/)), which was formed in 2020 by a group of friends who noticed the impact of police on houseless residents of the city while participating in the Black Lives Matter protests.

Stroud’s progression toward experiencing homelessness is sadly not all too unique in the U.S. Homelessness was [already a serious issue, and increasing in many places across the U.S.](https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/blog/homelessness-was-rise-even-pandemic#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20people%20experiencing%20unsheltered%20homelessness%20increased%20by%20nearly,also%20differed%20greatly%20by%20state.) prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The economic and physical [stresses of the pandemic](https://economicrt.org/publication/locked-out/) particularly in 2020 compounded many of the issues that typically lead to homelessness, including [unemployment](https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2021/article/unemployment-rises-in-2020-as-the-country-battles-the-covid-19-pandemic.htm) and strain on access to basic resources.

The risks and stresses to people experiencing homelessness during the pandemic increase during winter, particularly in damp, cold areas like the Pacific Northwest. [Exposure to the elements](https://nhchc.org/clinical-practice/diseases-and-conditions/cold-related-injuries/) can mean hypothermia and sometimes death for people experiencing homelessness.

In response to this reality, PMAN is collaborating with a number of other community volunteers and mutual aid groups on a [winter drive](https://www.instagram.com/p/CWUsPjGLHjh/) effort to collect tents, sleeping bags and other gear to support neighbors experiencing homelessness. Several Portland businesses have signed onto the effort as drop-off locations.

One such business is the sandwich restaurant and pub Bunk Bar, where Kelsey Anderson, a kitchen manager, says she feels fortunate to work with people who share her interest in supporting underserved communities via mutual aid efforts. She notes that everything brought into any of the drop-off sites “is sorted and distributed directly into the hands and homes of people who have a need for it by other working-class people, almost immediately.”

“We believe caring for each other and supporting people while in a system that pits us against each other is an inherently important and radical act,” she says. “This is particularly clear in the cold months and whilst still in the throes of a pandemic. I want people to understand their contributions to this drive can save a life. Every winter, humans in Portland and all over the country are abandoned outside, and there is absolutely no—absolutely no—justification for that.”

She notes that many mutual aid groups and organizers have collaborated on winter drive efforts recently to support and work with neighbors living outdoors.

“I hope more people will begin to see people who live outdoors as their neighbors, and as people that have just as much value as anyone else in their lives, instead of possibly someone they think they can’t relate to,” she says. “I’d like to encourage people to try and meet their outdoor neighbors, to do their own clothes drives, to feel free and emboldened to work in their communities with people that live in them. ‘Social solidarity not charity’ is a commonly used phrase when discussing mutual aid. We are caring for each other as an equal community, instead of relying on top-down organized philanthropy that can tend to ostracize.”

A volunteer with PMAN who has participated in mutual aid efforts for 30 years and asked to remain anonymous said they do so because the official systems in place to support people are inadequate.

“We need to be organizing as community members to [support] ourselves,” they said. “[PMAN] started in early June of 2020 in order to support downtown Portland houseless people who were being assaulted by police response to protesters. We had been going downtown participating in the protests and one night handed two men on the street a banana and a bottle of water while we were retreating from a tear gas attack. We stopped and talked to them, and heard what they were facing nightly, and asked what they needed.”

The interaction, they say, caused a shift in the focus of their activism, from primarily participating in the protests to taking direct action on the behalf of those in need. That day, a regular mission to support people living on the streets started, and it has stayed consistent each week since, the volunteer said.

“The city government in Portland pays good lip service to supporting houseless initiatives, but realistically what they support is sweeping people off the streets and making sure that they are not seen, heard, or endured,” the volunteer said.

“It would be an exaggeration to suggest that there are no services available, but it would be entirely accurate that these services are the pieces and scraps left behind after a system rooted in profit and advancement has had their fill at the table.”

The volunteer said this is part of why mutual aid is not only helpful but necessary.

“Mutual aid is inherently political, and inherently socially driven,” they said. “If we wait for protection from the police, we won’t get it. If we wait for salvation from the government, we won’t get it. And if we wait for solutions from the failed system in place, we won’t get it.… Think of mutual aid as action plus solidarity-based support networks which are community-driven. The core tenet is of uniting with, supporting, and upholding those who otherwise would have to fend for themselves, and instead doing it together, on the terms of those who are oppressed.”

They note that in preparation for winter, [Portland’s many mutual aid groups](https://www.pressenza.com/2021/01/how-the-community-helps-sustain-portlands-ongoing-black-lives-matter-protests/) are actively gathering hats, gloves, hand warmers, sleeping bags, blankets, coats, tents and scarves. If someone wants to get involved in their local mutual aid efforts, the volunteer says the best thing to do is to look up the mutual aid groups nearby, and assess “which speaks to them in terms of the work they are doing and how people want to get involved.”

“Ours is a small but very consistent group,” the volunteer said. “Other groups are larger and more thorough in their areas of focus. If people want to support what we are doing, they can read more about mutual aid and about us at our Instagram [@portlandmutualaid](https://www.instagram.com/portlandmutualaid/) or via the web at [portlandmutualaidnetwork.com](https://portlandmutualaidnetwork.com/). We can direct people to other groups if they are interested in aspects of community work where we aren’t currently focused.”

If someone wanted to start a mutual aid group, the volunteer says step one would be to assess need around them.

“Step two is to further determine the people you will work for and why, and the people you will work with,” they said. “Step three is to strategize on the terms of the people you are working for. You are not doing charity. You are trying to rebuild and build alternatives to the systems in place which are failing otherwise.… Let others—specifically those you work for—speak and be heard. We can easily fall into an unfortunate narrative rooted in comfort and privilege when we stop listening… Mutual aid is constantly in flux and flow, but directed toward cooperation. Charity is one-way. Mutual aid is an experience of solidarity.”