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Addressing Encampments on State Transportation Rights-of-Way with Marisa Zapata

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Welcome to PDXPLORES, a Portland State Research podcast featuring scholarship, innovations, and discoveries, pushing the boundaries of knowledge practice and what is possible for the benefit of our communities and the world.

My name is Marisa Zapata. I'm the Director of the Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative, as well as an Associate Professor in Urban Studies and Planning.

My work has been framed around public participation in government decision making. I am a land use planner and I've always worked on thinking about, and planning for futures across diverse and inequitable communities. My work centers around racial equity and thinking about participation in civic and government decision making. Whether that is neighbors engaging in processes with urban planners or people who have been homeless. Working with service providers to rethink how work should be delivered to them. Everything I think about is how we bring people together to collaborate and to re-envision how futures can look.

We initially started deeply concerned about a pandemic that would, for lack of a better term, ravage our community members experiencing homelessness. The idea that we would have a virus outside with people who did not have access to proper hygiene services or were living in close quarters in a congregated setting, was deeply, deeply concerning. We were able to really think through what it looked like to deliver homeless services. We were able to rethink models for providing emergency shelter, particularly in utilizing motels. And so, for the first time, because motels were vacant, because no one was traveling, people were able to rent and purchase motels, and in some cases hotels, to be able to serve people who were living outside already or people who are getting sick and needed places to be able to rest and recover. That model has proven to be quite helpful long term. And helping people transition into housing. While there's no benefits from COVID, in reality, we were able to take COVID as a moment to be able to think differently about services and how to actually support people while they did not have housing.

The other thing that happened during COVID is that we really were advised by the Centers for Disease Control to not sweep people. Sweeps means forcing people to relocate from where they've been living outside. Instead, the CDC advised that we make sure that everyone with social distancing 6 ft apart and to leave people more or less in place, we got to really see what it would look like to actually serve people where they were staying. Thankfully, outside of the shelters, we did not see the massive infection rate that we had feared with people experiencing homelessness. Although we, of course, are continuing to see the longer-term impacts on people who were homeless, who got COVID.

So, a lot of people always look for a very complicated answer to what is driving homelessness in our communities. And the reality is that the answer is quite simple, and that is a lack of access to affordable and stable housing. Now, there's a lot embedded in that set of simple words, but really it comes down to the access and ability to stay in your housing. It's in the word itself, homelessness, right? We want to be able to have people stay in their housing, which means thinking about tenant protections. Evictions can lead to homelessness. And we want to be able to get people back into housing if they become homeless, in order to be able to get back to living their lives.

Now of course, this is often what I say is that homelessness itself is a reflection of the most extreme examples of societal failures. We know that any group or any subpopulation that experiences marginalization or inequitable treatment to start with, is going to be at more risk for experiencing homelessness as the issues around oppression contribute, multiply, double, and are heaped on top of each other. It should not be a surprise that while African Americans are 13% of the nation's population, they are 40% of the population experiencing homelessness in the state of Oregon, 2.5 times more likely to experience homelessness if you are black, and three times more likely to experience homelessness than if you were Native American. So again, we see that while homelessness could happen to anyone who loses their housing, it really does start to show up most significantly with people who have been historically marginalized and oppressed.

So anytime we see an increase in property values and a decrease in vacancy rates, particularly when we see those two issues happening in rapid form, rapid acceleration of property values, which we've seen of course in the Portland metropolitan area, coupled with our decreased vacancy rates, we are going to see increases in homelessness. This has been demonstrated time and time again, most recently in a book called "Homelessness is a Housing Problem". Because we know that housing is a solution to homelessness, meaning that if you are homeless, the best thing we can do for you is provide housing. The fundamental question is, why didn't people have housing to start with? That is because we lack affordable housing for people to be able to access. When I say affordable housing, I don't necessarily mean government funded affordable housing, but housing that is actually attainable to people on a range of incomes. We are seeing increases in homelessness in places all around the country, urban areas where we are seeing rapid increases in property values combined with low vacancy rates, that can be any urban area in the country, and that is what is leading to increases in homelessness. We are seeing more decreases in homelessness, of course, where we have more access to housing at lower wages. Houston, Texas right now, is one of the noted areas for decreasing their rate of homelessness. That was a combination of nationally comparative low housing costs, a bit of a lower vacancy rate, but also some really important work in coordinating their response with homeless services to really be able to make sure that they were most effectively and efficiently reaching people to help them actually get into that available housing.

When people are living unsheltered, they literally have no place to go. They are making choices about where they can stay, that they are least likely to be harassed. They're making choices about where to stay, where they are most likely to be able to stay in place. Unfortunately, that often drives them to places that are actually deeply unsafe for them to be in. That includes Department of Transportation land. I know that nobody wants to see people living outside for a wide range of reasons. But residents in neighborhoods really don't want to see people experiencing homelessness. Often for reasons that center around them, being uncomfortable with seeing people living in poverty, living in such dire circumstances. When people are pushed out of neighborhoods when they're pushed out of parks in cities, they are going to be increasingly pushed to more property that people who are housed would not be trying to access for recreation or general life. That's where you're going to start getting into properties that are from the Department of Transportation. At the state level, that's going to be our property that's surrounding interstates or state highways. It's going to be our clover leaves that are coming in with our interstates, and then of course, bridges that go with our interstates.

People who are living in land that is not designed for people to live, which is anybody who's unsheltered, are already going to be at risk from any number of activities or things, right? So, we can think about it as

hazard issues, right? As someone sleeping outside and there's an earthquake, they aren't protected the way that you would be inside a structure. And so, we can think about it on that level. We can also start thinking about, well, people living on sidewalks are also not protected from vehicles in case of vehicular accidents. And we do see that people are struck by cars and other vehicles who are living and sleeping on sidewalks. Now that isn't DOT property. DOT property can actually, for me, be even more alarming, because the ways that you access a lot of the Department of Transportation property is really through seriously unsafe activities. Imagine trying to cross into a clover leaf for an interstate that is not designed for pedestrian activity in the slightest. It is an area that I would never want to see somebody walking in and through. And yet, people are being forced to take refuge in an area that is significantly more dangerous than other areas to sleep in.

Similarly, if you look at the inclines on the sides of our interstate, they can be quite steep. Definitely not designed for people to be walking on or living on, and yet people don't often have other options. I see people in these circumstances and I'm afraid of falling, I'm afraid of being hit by vehicles, I'm also really concerned about air pollution. When we look at greenhouse gas emissions and concerns around exposure to particulate matter, and we see people who are literally living on interstates with absolutely no protective structure, we are looking at people who are being exposed continually to chemicals and matter that is known to potentially lead to cancer. We've got both the short-term issues of being injured or killed because of the living environment itself, as well as the long-term health consequences related to cancer, emphysema, and COPD.

As part of the project, we'll be looking at the impact on facilities as well as equipment from DOT. From really looking at the impact from people having to camp on the land. And that's, I think, an important framing because sometimes people think about damage to something, they're thinking about people who are being criminal and trying to break things and rip them apart. Whereas, really, I think what we'll be looking at is what are the impacts of having tents and people living along with having to manage their garbage and other pieces of property on land that was just not designed to accommodate this kind use.

So again, a lot of this will be unpacked during the research project, right? So really trying to think about what does it mean to respond to homelessness for DOT's. Are there significant impacts on the land? I know that from looking around, there certainly are, right? You can hear reports of that. But also, really just being clear about what is a frustration versus what is an actual impact that makes it hard to do the work that you're required to do.

So, phase one, we've already started and we're really excited. We're about to be launching two surveys. One to staff at departments of transportation and another to staff at continuums of care across the country. Continuums of care are the local jurisdictional organization that is in charge of responding to homelessness, based on its relationship to the federal government. So, we'll be surveying both groups of people to see what they think about and know about people experiencing homelessness, living on property that is owned by DOT's. From that, along with the literature review that we've already largely completed, we'll be really looking and thinking about and identifying what kind of practices are being taken, what are people doing, and what are people not doing that they want to be doing. We often know that there's a range of options in this work. People may take on work that is more preventative in terms of preventing people from accessing property. Versus other people might try to say, we've got people living here, how do we support them? While other people might be saying, let's just not think about it. And not from like a problematic framework, but you know what? We know people are there.

We're just going to let them be. We're also not going to try to stop them from being there. So, there's a lot of options and ranges of activities that can take place. We want to just try to really dig into that for the first phase, try to clarify and classify different activities. While we're doing that, we'll also be taking a look at what responses we've gotten from different places in the country and we'll be identifying what places to focus on in phase two.

In phase two, we'll be interviewing departments of transportation depending on their responses to the survey, as well as doing deep dives into three to four case sites. So actually, visiting locations and actually going in and talking to people who are serving people experiencing homelessness, people who are experiencing homelessness and of course, Department of Transportation staff.

Portland State University will be working with a total of four partners to deliver this project: one is the University of California at Los Angeles, the other is a consulting firm called High Street Consulting, and then the fourth is a private consultant, Andre Tromole. We came together based on our experiences working either in active transportation, airports, actually having started some of this work, either earlier in our careers or doing some ongoing work right now around departments of transportation and homelessness. And so, we'll be diving up the work and using our collective brainpower to really try to investigate this issue as thoroughly as possible and come up with a robust report and a robust set of guidelines or guidance recommendations on what people can do based on what their goals are.

We really try to bring in as many perspectives as possible to this issue. One of the things that has been very engaging for me as an urban planner is really thinking about our places, particularly our urban places that we're not designed for human habitation. The whole idea is that we design cities for places where people live in housing units. And the infrastructure is completely designed to support that model.

So, when we think about the guts of a city, as we often talk about in planning, we're thinking about sewer lines underneath our streets, we're thinking about water lines underneath our streets. So, the things that actually make the cleanliness of our city actually be able to function. When people are living outside, they are of course, not able to access those services. They don't have access to regular trash service. They don't have access to immediate hygiene facilities to use the bathroom or to wash their hands. Now, why does this matter? In terms of the reports and studies we're looking at, this is relatively new. This degree of unsheltered homelessness in terms of a contemporary era is relatively new for many cities in this country. And so, we're really just seeing an emerging body of literature that is talking about the impact of homelessness on publicly owned property that is owned and managed by groups that don't do human services. Department of Transportation is not human services, Bureau of Environmental Services, not human services. Airports. Transit systems. These were not designed to house people or to have people stay on their land. And so really looking across the board to see what people are talking about and doing in different spaces. Libraries, for instance, are taking on a whole new set of activities. We're almost complete with a transit system study that's looking at homelessness, another national study we've also completed along with another consulting firm and Urban Institute. We have also completed a study on airports and homelessness. UCLA has completed several other studies related to homelessness and transit systems, and has been working on a study that specifically looks at DOT's as well.

Our commitment is of course, effect and to objectively assess what departments of transportation are doing. And at the same time, we also want to be thinking about from the perspective of people who

work in homeless services and from the perspective of people who have experienced homelessness, what does it look like to affirmatively support people experiencing homelessness.

In any of the projects that we've looked at, where people are living on land that they are not supposed to have to live on, we see a natural tension between the mission of the organization that is managing that land in between the people who are actually having to live on that land. And it can be a real question on what you do about that. And what is actually in the best interests of people experiencing homelessness, what is in the best interests of the general public, and what is in the best interest of people who are managing or owning that particular property. And those answers are not always the same thing and so you're having to really be thoughtful about under what circumstances does it make sense to take on certain activities?

As someone who is deeply engaged in homeless services, I might want to say, hey everyone should be able to camp wherever they want to. I don't actually think that, but there are a lot of people in homelessness work that could say that. At the same time, we also don't want to be setting up barriers for people to camp everywhere, because if they can't camp everywhere, where are they going to go? I think this is where we get into another thing that I'm always going to bring to these conversations, which is this question of partnership and collaboration. And really trying to think about if one land holding agency decides to take activities to simply keep people off of all of their land, well, what does that do to other entities? And in fact, I think that's really relevant in the DOT case because people are having to choose some very unsafe areas because they cannot live in places that might be safer for them. And so really trying to think about this as a collaborative effort across jurisdictions. Lastly, we are definitely going to be thinking about this in terms of racial equity. How are people of color showing up on DOT property? Is that different than people who are white or how they might be showing up elsewhere in community? And how do we make sure that things are being developed and designed to actually think about the specific needs of people of color?

Our team is made up of several research institutions at universities. So, at Portland State University we have HRAC, The Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative. We have TREC, the Transportation Research and Education Cooperative. We've also got UCLA's Institute for Transportation Studies. And Andre Tromole bringing an extraordinary amount of expertise in this area of research, particularly the intersection of homelessness and DOT's. And then Damon Fordham is the lead from High Street Consulting.

So, our team is really poised to move and advance this work quickly. It was a very tight scope and turnaround, and so we're fortunate that UCLA has already done DOT research in conjunction to homelessness. So, they've got information that we're building from, they haven't, obviously done the exact same thing that we'll be doing, but it means that we could write surveys faster because of the interviews that they had done with DOT staff. We've got an amazing set of partnerships that have already existed. So, PSU already worked specifically with the consultant at High Street Consulting, Damon on a project around airports and homelessness when Damon was at a different consulting firm. Andre and has been a member of Urban Studies and Planning, so we have a lot of pre-existing relationships. TREC and HRAC has already worked together on a transportation transit system and homelessness project. And so, we've already got a lot of these connections in place. It seemed like a no brainer that we would put together a collaborative application and go after this project that would then

shift to DOT's. Damon also brings experience working as a manager for a DOT, as well as running the lobbying organization for DOTs nationally.

Our goal is, of course, to be able to deliver a robust and well thought through and documented research project. So, we want to be able to say that we have thoroughly investigated the questions that involve and revolve around this issue with departments of transportation and homelessness. I think that because we all bring a strong passion and commitment, like so many of our collaborators and colleagues in transportation, a commitment to helping serve people who are vulnerable and marginalized. being able to also hold that in perspective while dealing with the realities of what is happening with DOT's.

I expect that we will find a range of activities that DOTs are taking in response to homelessness. I think we'll find that within a DOT there will be a range of activities. We will see everything from people partnering carefully with service providers to go out and do outreach with people experiencing homelessness, helping make sure they're able to get into housing. I wouldn't be surprised if we didn't find DOTs that are actually finding ways to donate land for encampments, organizing official encampments, villages, pod villages, maybe even conversions to affordable housing. We'll also certainly find DOT's that are at least in some areas putting in architectural features to make it so that people cannot actually camp in those areas. So, I think there'll be a wide, wide set of activities. And I assume that these will also change over time. I think that that is one thing that we're seeing a lot across the board in all public agency work, is that attitudes change in a place. Someplace tries one thing and it's not going the way they'd hope, so they shift to something else. And so, I think we'll also see some patterns in how long agencies stay the course on what kinds of activities and what makes them shift gears.

Any public land-owning entity organization will benefit from any of the work that is being done in another property-owning public land entity. And that's because there are complexities to the work and there are unique factors, but at the end of the day, we are asking the fundamental question of how do government agencies that are not providing services to people manage their property, meet the obligations of the specific components of their mission, while dealing with the fact that there are a lot of people who are suffering right now and who have no other choice but to take refuge on our property.

I think right now the largest challenge in thinking about homelessness is compassion fatigue. I think it's hard to hold center that there is a solution to homelessness. And I think that in particular, for staff, even staff who work in homeless services, but staff whose job is not to work with people who are profoundly suffering, and it certainly haven't been trained to do that. It's very hard to see people suffering and make sense out of that in your head. And to not get angry and depressed and frustrated. And it's hard to know that, at least in a lot of communities, people are working really hard prevent and end homelessness. And I think what makes that challenging in the context of this project is that people could be just tired of talking about this and could be tired of trying to proactively help respond to homelessness because it can feel like you're not doing anything, right? It's a rinse repeat cycle. And so, I think that is where we're at right now nationally. A lot of frustration, both for people experiencing homelessness but also for the people who are having to respond to them or respond to homelessness in places that homelessness was never supposed to exist.

So, one of the things that we always hope for when we're interviewing people in particular and even through surveying, is helping people have a space to say, let me think about this issue. In interviewing, there's that opportunity to process some of the feelings and experiences that are happening. I always want to start an interview from a humanizing perspective to level set and say, it's okay to be angry. It's

okay to be frustrated. People are really in bad shape outside right now. A lot of people are. If you're dealing with that and seeing that every day, that is going to take a toll on you. And so, I think it's really setting a space for reflection and maybe a little bit of calm within this larger structure where you're just feeling overwhelmed. So, I think it's first acknowledging and validating the way people are feeling as well as saying like look, this is an opportunity to try to help DOT's think about the variety of practices they can take on and in what circumstances. This is the way that we give voice to your experiences and voice to your ideas.

So, when I moved to Portland, I came in as a participatory planner. I was looking at community engagement and public planning and policymaking. In that context, I was invited to join our local continuum of care called A Home for Everyone. I didn't really know much about homelessness at all before I started working, particularly from a scholarly perspective, before I joined the continuum. But one of the commitments that I see when you're doing collaborative work is that you learn about a topic area. I was bringing an expertise on racial equity and on qualitative research, and then needing to learn about homelessness. There is actually nothing that draws me into working on homelessness because it is profoundly depressing. Right? I think a lot of scholars are like, I'm super excited about XY and Z. I'm not excited about homelessness. I am excited about the opportunity to try to drive policy and decisions and public opinion to doing the right thing. The evidence base for preventing and resolving homelessness is so absolutely, completely clear, repeated time and time again, that I really think that I have been given an opportunity to help lift that up as much as possible. In that sense, I'm driven to do the work because I was invited to have the opportunity to do that work.

This is Marisa Zapata and my goal is to inform and change the way that governments practice based on the needs of communities of color.

Thank you for listening to PDXplores. If you liked what you heard on this episode, please read and follow the show anywhere you get your podcasts.