

>> [MUSIC]. Hi, you all. I'm Marisa Zapata. This is the podcast where we examine homelessness by talking to researchers and experts who of course include people with lived experience of homelessness to understand what we are missing in the headlines and sound bites. In each episode, we'll help clear up misconceptions about homelessness and to answer what it would take to prevent and end homelessness in Portland and beyond. Who am I? I'm an Associate Professor of Land-Use Planning at Portland State University and Director of PSU's Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative, a research center dedicated to reducing and preventing homelessness where we lift up the experiences and perspectives of people of color. [MUSIC] Today, we are joined by Michael Buonocore and he is executive director of Home Forward, is that your title? >> Yes I am, it is. >> All right. We are hoping that you could tell us a little about yourself, maybe some fun professional things and boring personal things. You can flip that around. >> [LAUGHTER] I might have to flip that around. I've been the executive director at Home Forward for six years and almost 20 years since I was hired by the organization. But inside that 20 years, I had a little less than a year when I dipped out and went to work at Sisters Of The Road, which was a pretty amazing experience. That's something that still many years later grounds my work and my outlook. On a personal level, I'm a dad of two grown kids. I've lived in Portland for 26 years. >> That make you a local Portlander? I'm always confused at what gives you [OVERLAPPING]. >> I declared myself at 20 years. >> I'm from Texas and so you never get to claim that unless you were born there. >> There are some Oregonians who are very sensitive about it, but I didn't consult with anybody I just [OVERLAPPING]. >> I appreciate that. I was really interested when you said that you thought your experience at Sisters without that you would not be quite as effective at your job and I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about that. >> They're just such a value-driven organization. One of their values is that we should always be working towards systemic change to end homelessness and affordable housing is, what is needed to end people's homelessness. It just gave me a different perspective on the opportunity that I had had when I was here that I didn't fully understand and so it really broadened my worldview. Then of course, it's really important at Sisters Of The Road that you build authentic relationships with people who are experiencing homelessness. That by itself changes everyone. It's not possible to be in relationship with people regardless of their identity and not build your understanding, your sense of empathy, and just really striving towards systemic solutions, keeping that motivation rooted in what the community is asking for as opposed to some bureaucratic idea of what that is. Definitely a lot of that is attributable to Sisters. >> What do you think community members misunderstand or don't get about homelessness? >> When people recognize that they don't understand it or have misunderstandings about it, I have all the patience in the world [inaudible], but I think one of the fundamental misunderstanding is that people don't understand it, but think that they do. There are simple solutions to end homelessness, but there are also simplistic solutions and I just wish that people would feel comfortable in the way that I feel comfortable knowing I don't understand neuroscience [LAUGHTER]. It's one of those things that people just think like oh if you just did this or if oh they just did that, or they encountered someone who told them that they preferred living outside, that homeless people just they don't want a home, like this is a lifestyle that they enjoy. I appreciate being inside of it that there are a lot of complexities around understanding the systems that are working to address homelessness but again yeah, I wish there was even more humility around asking questions, wanting to build relationships, and

being comfortable with not knowing and not pushing ignorant ideas into the public sphere at a high volume. It's not helpful. >> I had a wonderful meeting this week with somebody who did come with that humility, and said, "I have a skill set that might be helpful to you. Tell me what you need to push the work that I don't necessarily know about." It was just such a refreshing moment. >> Those folks are out there, but it would be nice if there were more. Join us listeners [LAUGHTER] >> A follow-up question just going back to these misconceptions. I hear this one too a lot, people who are talking about how that they've heard that people who are houseless want to live this way. Really thinking about like well, what is the misconception there? >> I think there are a number of reasons. One of them may be that the shelter options that are available don't work for them for any number of reasons which can include personal safety, which can include trauma, which can include settings that are not culturally responsive to people of color. Then there is all of the ways in which systems have failed people in the past. Health care system, the justice system, the housing system may have failed people multiple times. People build, I think, resilience and survival skills. There may be folks who say that they choose to live outside and want to live outside and that may be the safest thing that they've experienced. Those are just a couple of reasons. There can be any number. Are there others [inaudible]. >> It is a lot of these issues around past experiences and being afraid that people are going to be failed again. The other thing that I've thought about and I've had a couple of people tell me, they often will say that to people just so they'll go away, and stop asking them that. I'm amazed at the number of people who just like stop and ask a random person who is in a tent, do you want to keep living this way or do you want to move inside? I can't imagine how dehumanizing that is and the force performance. What you might actually say in response to that may not actually be a real answer. >> Oh, absolutely. Yeah. >> The survey that the center did with the joint office, and street roots, and Shannon Singleton I think really demonstrated that people imagine that there are services out there that would work for them. We asked people what would make them feel more supported in committing the next week. Therapists, caseworkers, stable place to sleep and rest. Those numbers went up, compared to the week before where they hadn't felt supported. It is, I think, understanding that there is a past experience that is not good, but that people do want and imagine a good thing that could help them. One of the other things you had said that there are simple solutions but not simplistic solutions and we talked a little bit about the idea of simplistic solutions. But I'm wondering what you think like some of those simple solutions are. >> A huge amount more affordable housing. [LAUGHTER]. >> Make the housing happen. >> We're capable of it as a country. It's expensive, it's not that expensive. The appropriate amount of investments sustained over time to create enough affordable housing. We could also build an economy that pays people enough to afford rent and food and to take care of themselves. Could do both, I don't want to get too crazy. >> This is not a show about radicalism at all. [LAUGHTER] Well, that actually part of a good segue into the work at home forward. Why don't you explain to listeners what in the world home forward is? You can't just say it's the housing authority because no one knows what that means either. >> Sure. We are technically that, which generally means that we administer the public housing and the housing choice voucher program, often referred to as the Section 8 program, that had been its name. Its real name now is the housing choice voucher program, and that provides rental subsidies for people to be able to live in the open rental market. Serves a very similar population of folks, a very similar income profile of folks. Public housing is apartment communities that we own and the

rent levels attached to the apartments have subsidy that adjusts to people's incomes and the voucher like a rent subsidy that travels with a family or an individual. >> That means you're both putting out and sending out money to clients so that they can access housing. Then you've got a site where you're actually building or managing or renovating your own units that you manage specifically? >> Yes. We also have a portfolio of housing that is considered affordable housing. That's not subsidize based on people's incomes, but the rent levels are set to be affordable based on a certain income level in the community. In that role, we are not unique in the community. There are a number of other affordable housing providers. >> The phrase affordable housing gets thrown around a lot. What kind of incomes are we really talking about in Portland when we're talking about people who are qualifying for some affordable housing? >> I'm terrible at holding the [OVERLAPPING] income levels. Yeah. >> Roughly. [OVERLAPPING] This isn't a test, we're not going to turn you into [inaudible] for not memorizing the perfect level cuts. [LAUGHTER] >> I mean, you might see rents for a one-bedroom apartment at 900, \$1,000, where it might otherwise be \$1,500. The affordability levels are based on what's referred to as area median income. Very often it's at 60 percent of area median income. Let's say a family of four ballpark, \$36,000. What we find and I think what other affordable housing providers find in our affordable housing portfolio is that people are also rent burdens in our affordable housing because we are more affordable than the private market. That's still not necessarily leaving you enough money to get all the food you need and transportation costs and childcare and all of it. >> In terms of language and I think a lot of people understand people are over that housing cost burden; 30 percent metric that often gets used to discuss, what housing can you actually afford? Then we're essentially having to have people who are making little, essentially having to have a higher burden of housing costs. >> We're not unique as a Housing Authority in that we house or provide rental subsidies for about a quarter to a third of the people who are income qualified. That's true nationally as well. If you've got someone who would benefit from a housing subsidy to get that rent payment down to 30 percent of their income, but there isn't a subsidy available, they may be paying 50, 60, 70 percent of their income to live in what's considered affordable housing. [LAUGHTER] Again, like that is more affordable than what they could find in the private market and there's not enough of that subsidy that would make their rent actually affordable. >> I think this helps people understand that it's not as simple as giving somebody a voucher or a place to live and that in five years, once they've started to recover from the trauma of homelessness or have had the great job training to think they're not going to be in need of continuing to have support for housing. >> Absolutely. Again, it's an issue of the economy. We see plenty of folks who come in with low incomes, increase their hours, get pay raises, get job training that leads to higher-paying jobs. Going from \$22,000 a year to \$45,000 a year is a massive move for someone to make, and takes a lot of effort and you still can't pay the damn bills. >> Yeah, I've seen some really interesting conversations around a living wage versus a housing wage. I mean, I can't remember the last time I saw the housing wage in Oregon. I think it was up to the 23 or \$24 range. It was a massive win to get minimum wage up to 15 and yet it's still not going to be a housing wage. I think that's hard for people to wrap their head around. One of the things that we often talk about is the disparate rates of housing insecurity and homelessness for people of color. Particularly, we see this in terms of the data for people who are Black and Native American. From your experience, why do you think that these disparate rates exist to the degree that they do? >> Oh, because that's how our country was built.

[LAUGHTER] We're getting exact the outcomes. [OVERLAPPING] >> Michael is like, I can't believe I'm having to explain this right now to this lady. [LAUGHTER] She's going to probably yell at me [inaudible]. [LAUGHTER] >> Is this the time when you identify that I'm a White man [OVERLAPPING]. >> I was just about to say. [OVERLAPPING] >> I should probably answer this question. [LAUGHTER] >> Michael is a White man, be the only White man whoever appears on this show. We'll get to the question. I mean, I think you're already hearing why I wanted him to speak to these issues and there's a couple of questions; I think he has been able to answer very well. >> I mean, I was being a little flip but it's the truth. Whether it's housing policy and practice that specifically excluded Black veterans from getting VA loans or intentional redlining in communities that suppressed home values, and prevented the building of wealth or predatory loan practices that wiped out whatever wealth existed. Like that by itself, diminishes the economic resilience of Black and Brown people. That doesn't even take into account every other system that's been built to have the same effect. Like the inadequate healthcare that people get, that make them that much more vulnerable to losing employment. Just the whole damn system is built to get exactly the outcomes that we're getting. >> I always say that it's not a surprise. We designed a system to do this. Here was the money question. People are walking around Portland and they're still seeing people who were unsheltered and yet we voted now on two bonds to build housing. Now we voted in the services measure, what is taking so long? Where is the affordable housing? >> Part of it is public perception of you become aware of something and think like get shovels in the dirt tomorrow, [LAUGHTER] which is what we want to do. >> Yes. I want to do that, tell me how I can make that happen. >> That's the other part of the scenario. This isn't the only way it happens, but it is a common way that it happens, that the city says, there are resources available, we're going to give some pieces of property, and we're going to give some money. Home Forward and others raised their hand and we get these awards. From that moment then you have to start assembling financing to build it, because the money that comes with it from the city is never intended to pay for the whole thing, it's never going to be enough. There are affordable housing tax credits that are awarded at the state. That's a whole bucket of something to understand but that helps to finance affordable housing. There's a mortgage, there's sometimes an organization has their own cash that they can put in. But like right from the outset of there being a property identified, you've got a funding hole to fill before you can ever put a shelter. That is just inherent to our industry. >> You're talking about multiple sources of funding. >> Yes. >> That probably have multiple types of applications, some of which you're going to be public applications that will have a different type or a higher level of scrutiny. This sounds awful. >> It's not great. Part of what birthed this is the idea that there is corruption in public housing, the idea that anywhere you can find an instance of something going badly, you can extrapolate that too, like government is corrupt or banks are corrupt or whatever. But in fact, public housing as a concept and as a resource where you get the money to build the housing, do all this other stuff, it's funded. It was politicized and it was like, if this kind of housing benefits from the brilliance of the private market, banks and lawyers are involved, then there's going to be this rigor and scrutiny and it's just going to be a better system. In fact, what happens is you spend more money on legal fees and banks and it takes more time. There's just a degree of complexity that's built into it that cannot be avoided unless there is just someone, the Gates Foundation that comes in and says here's \$50 million free and clear to build a building, then you can just go. >> Then this becomes the argument for a public housing

fund or to re-invest in that kind of fund. >> It is, in this last election cycle was the first time we started hearing people talking about re-investing. In the years leading up, what we have heard is essentially that public housing is dying and to just accept that it's going away. We haven't invested in new public housing stock in this country in decades and we've lost hundreds of thousands of apartments. But it doesn't mean we couldn't make the choice to re-invest in public housing and we've seen some politicians, including locally Congressman Blumenauer put a proposal forward that would, I want to say quadruple funding for subsidized housing, hope flickers. There's just the financing part of it, assembling that, getting that all together is huge. >> This is also something that comes up, particularly when the private developers who will say, well, we could solve this faster if you gave us waivers on 17 million different things. I think it's where these questions of values I want to try to really start to uplift. I think this financing example is quite fascinating. The existing financing system that you're describing actually exists because of a set of value assumptions. But then are there other things that add time to our processes but are driven by values that we've chosen, that we could unchoose, but then we have chosen to embrace? >> Yeah, maybe not time but money. The other criticism of affordable housing is that it's expensive and there are a number of factors that go into that, like you said, social and public values around the idea that if public funding is going to be used to build a twelve storey building, that it should be done with good environmental standards in mind. Let alone the idea that one of the ways that black and brown peoples' health suffers and poor people in general health suffers, it's because of things like indoor air quality, because of living in substandard housing. The idea here is, we're actually going to build something of enough quality that people living there paths healthy conditions to live in and we're going to try to minimize the impact to the environment. That's an example. Another example is around wages and job protections for people who are working on publicly funded projects. That inherently is more expensive. >> Yeah, I think it's just so important for people to understand the different points in which we are doing, we're always doing value-driven work. We being clear about what those values are and if people want to re-examine them to make affordable housing happen faster, we can. But there's also reasons why some of these things are there. Some of them I personally think are great. I also think there's some that I think are problematic. The last question, wondering in this work around affordable housing, how are friendly nimbies factor in? Nimbies are not in my backyard buddies. >> Yeah. [LAUGHTER] We've made it this far without me dropping an F-bomb and you're just [NOISE] [LAUGHTER] what I can tell you is that I live in a neighborhood with lots of affordable housing developments in close proximity and public housing developments in close proximity. I think very often you get people who will express, again, "progressive values" around wanting more affordable housing, wanting more shelters for people experiencing homelessness and don't want them across the street from them. Then no one has a good answer about where it should be as long as it's somewhere other than in proximity to them. We've experienced security issues that are properties that we've had to spend some time and resources to address. There are lots of people living in private market apartments where that happens and lots of people who are earning plenty of money [LAUGHTER] in their neighborhoods. Yeah, that's a frustration. >> [LAUGHTER] Do they actually protest your sites? I'm sure you know about the uproar in my neighborhood and Saint John's over trying to site this tiny home village. >> Yeah. >> But do you have that level of unscrutiny by neighbors when you're trying to site a project? >> Yeah, we really have not. >>

That isn't a rallying call for any nimbies who are listening. >> Don't call me. [LAUGHTER] >> Continue to not protest to these projects. Is there anything that you want to share, you want people to remember or know about Home Forward, work in homelessness or just homelessness in general? >> One thing I actually meant to say earlier when you asked about misperceptions, it's really important for us to have committed local political leadership around ending homelessness. This is a national problem that has been caused by federal disinvestment. Homelessness is not a local failure. It doesn't mean we shouldn't be critical and be pushing local leaders. But I think another thing that's really harmful around efforts to make progress is when we're getting local investment that helps and certainly helps things not be worse, but the scale of need has to be addressed with federal investment and that's where we're being dramatically failed. I hope whether it's when people vote or when they are mad about [LAUGHTER] some elected leader or somebody that they recognize that larger context, it's important to spread the anger. [LAUGHTER] >> I agree with that. Share the frustration and anger and [MUSIC] pay attention to who's elected at all levels, it comes to an issue you want to endorse. >> Yes. >> Hi Michael, thank you so much for being with me today. That was Michael Buonocore, who in his free time is the Executive Director of Home Forward. Talking with us about affordable housing and why it takes longer than you might think to come online. Thank you for joining us in tackling these complicated questions as we build knowledge about how our community can move forward together on homelessness.