

Marisa Zapata:

Hi, y'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're missing in the headlines and soundbites. In each episode, we will 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 and Action Collaborative, a research center dedicated to reducing and preventing homelessness, where we lift up the experiences and perspectives of people of color.

Speaker 2:

In this episode, we talk with Jessica Mathis and Calvin from Welcome Home Coalition. They talk about this Speaker Advocate program and the value of hearing and connecting to people with lived experience of homelessness.

Speaker 3:

Welcome y'all. It's great to have our guests who are coming to us from the Welcome Home Coalition Advocacy training program. We're going to hear from two exciting guests, Jessica Mathis, who is working at Welcome Home Coalition, and Calvin, who is one of our Peer Advocates. Is that what your title is? How are we describing the people in the program?

Jessica Mathis:

So far, we've called our folks advocates.

Speaker 3:

Okay. So, why don't we just start with a basic question? What is the Welcome Home Coalition?

Jessica Mathis:

The Welcome Home Coalition is a coalition of agencies, individuals in Portland who are looking to just further the idea that everyone deserves a place to call home. That can be through different interventions, whether that is increasing affordable housing, increasing home ownership, increasing housing programs, permanent supportive housing, or any other sort of subsidy or support that'll keep people safe in housing.

Speaker 3:

For listeners out there, first I am on the Welcome Home steering that committee, and also Welcome Home Coalition was instrumental in the creation and passing of two of the area bonds that are addressing affordable housing. The city of Portland Bond, and

then the Metro Housing Bond. If you're wondering how things get made and how they happen, Welcome Home Coalition was a driver at both of those discussions. Jessica, what is your job?

Jessica Mathis:

I am the Regional Organizer with Welcome Home, which is a relatively new position. I came on right before the start of the pandemic. The goal for my job is to create training that can engage folks with lived experience of homelessness and housing instability, so that people can advocate for themselves and for their community.

Speaker 3:

What is this program all about?

Jessica Mathis:

We really wanted to do this advocacy training program. I have a social service background. I worked as a domestic violence advocate and ran a housing program for about six years. In that time, there was policy work being done, and there were these trainings for folks to get engaged. But a lot of these trainings were either paced or done in a way that wasn't very trauma informed. They weren't accessible to a wide variety of people. Depending on the audience, those trainings can be really great. You come to Salem, you take the time, you do this day training, you go and you speak to your legislator, but that isn't necessarily the greatest format for everybody.

Especially for folks who are not sharing, I think it's a little bit easier for people in social services, people who run agencies to share stories that they witness, or maybe even past experiences that they have moved past. I experienced homelessness as a youth, but I think for folks who are either currently in that trauma, or it's a little more recent, it takes a little bit more education and a little bit more support to make sure that folks are able to present their stories the way they want to present them. They have agency over those stories and they know where and why they're doing it and showing up. That's the idea behind our program that has yet to have a snappy name, but that's the goal.

Speaker 3:

I often think snappy name, pressure, and acronyms is actually a reflection of historically white institutions. That we need to be able to sum up everything that is messy and complex with a snappy name or an acronym. So, I'm all for the long names that describe the things. One of the things I wanted to follow up on that you had said is this idea of trauma informed. I feel that's a phrase that gets thrown around all over the place. Could you talk a little bit about what trauma informed work looks like with the work that you're doing?

Jessica Mathis:

I definitely agree. It gets thrown around. I think especially outside of ... I come from the domestic violence sphere of work and I feel we take trauma informed care very seriously. But I have seen it thrown around a little bit more casually in the broader systems. For me, trauma informed care or trauma informed trainings would be, largely, firstly centered on the folks in the training. Yes, we have a direction and an idea, and concepts, but these trainings are for and about the communities we're serving, and whatever their needs are. I think trauma informed is anything from really simple stuff. Are people comfortable? Are they fed? Are they able to concentrate? Are you open to hearing about other people's concerns outside of the training and making sure they're in a good space to be in that training, all the way to how are we talking about sharing the story?

What rooms are we in? Informed consent is really important. Do people know where their stories are going? Who they're talking to? Are we making sure not only are the training spaces safe and free from judgment and interrogation, but are the people who we're inviting to listen to our folks, the tables are bringing our folks to, are those places where people feel heard and their stories have meaning? I was an advocate doing this job for years. I had spaces where I felt like I was invited to be the black person. I think when we think trauma informed, it's not just individual trauma, but also systemic trauma as well. So, are we asking people to show up and do all this labor and represent broad communities? Or are we coming to people? Are we giving something back? What are we also doing to make the relationship reciprocal for the community? Not just drawing resources out of community and labor and energy.

Speaker 3:

Right. So, extraction is how I describe it, yeah. It's literally people are coming in to extract things from us, from other marginalized communities, and say, "Look, we took the thing and now we're trying." I'm really grateful that y'all have taken this up. We get so many asks to magically produce people, to share their stories. It is so messed up. But at the same time, we want people to be able to share their stories if they want to. I love this model and I love how you're thinking about the work. Let's talk to Calvin. Hi, Calvin. How are you?

Calvin:

Hi. Doing good. Good listening, learning from you guys, listening to Jessica and you talk.

Speaker 3:

Do you have any reactions to what she was saying?

Calvin:

No. I just got a better idea of what she does. I'm a recipient of that. When I heard her talking about how we want to try to have a good environment in a place where people can feel comfortable sharing and this type of things, this is what I notice, that she does really well with CAC. Among her other duties, she has a group of homeless people that have overcome homelessness and come together as an advisory group. They're learning to try to ... A lot of people don't have as much experience as you or Jessica. They come in and they try to contribute. Then Jessica's job seems to be to teach people how to do that, contribute the knowledge that you have with your experiences, and to be able to contribute that in a way that other people can learn from it and help, hopefully, apply it to helping with the problem. Homelessness.

Speaker 3:

You mentioned the CAC, which I'm assuming is a Community Advisory Committee?

Calvin:

Yes ma'am. Yes, miss.

Speaker 3:

I'm great with ma'am, I'm from Texas. So, ma'am is great. You're a man, I'm 18. So, what is that committee advising? Who are they advising?

Calvin:

Okay. What we're doing there. When I first got invited, I was very excited to be invited to be a part of it. I've been a part of it for three years now, but we come together and these are people that's been involved with Join, which I have. I experienced homeless and I, and Join helped me. I can't give them enough kudos being a great organization that really is one of the best in Portland, and the counselors and everybody that helped me there. I went there and was helped, and developed a relationship with a lot of other homeless people going through that place at the same time as me, and a lot of ability to be involved in the community with Join, we do neighborhood cleanups and we have a community garden and these type of things, ways to be able to help and contribute.

But after you go through that, and then you've overcome homelessness, somehow got yourself a place to live and you're better off now. Then, at that point, you're a person that might end into up at CAC because you're trying to give back. You benefited from their program, they helped you, and it puts you into your heart to want to try to help other people that have been through the same thing as you, and especially to Join. I want to be able to help Join because I know how hard they work to try to help homeless people. So, we come together and then ... Basically, you learn there. You learn how to go into a meeting according to Robert's rules of order. You go in and you [inaudible]

00:10:47]. Not talk over other people and wait for your turn, and stay focused and keep your ... You just learn how to function in a meeting in a way that you can contribute something in not disrupt the meeting, this type of things.

Then from there, we get to the point where it's flattering. They ask us our opinions about housing projects they're developing, and things that might seem over our head, what do I know about that, I'm just a homeless person that [inaudible 00:11:13] came home with. But they really want to know. They take that information and they use it, because it has value. It really does. To get people that have been through that experience themselves and give them the ability, in a structured environment like a CAC meeting, to communicate the knowledge that they have, is what CAC is all about. Giving people the ability to contribute something, and try to help make a difference. I love CAC. I've been going there for three years. If I was a millionaire, I'd still be going there.

Speaker 3:

I was just going to say that what you have just described is absolutely beautiful. I know that you're saying that, what do you know, but you know what works for you and for the people that you know. You've also, I think, countered some stereotypes that, unfortunately, a lot of our listeners might have about people who've experienced homelessness. I think one of them is this idea that, or just this larger thing of giving back. That you're not someone who was freeloading or just trying to take something, but that you have decided that you want to commit to continuing to give back. I wondered if you had anything more that you wanted to share about that.

Calvin:

My experience with Join [inaudible 00:12:30] outreach people and these people are trained to have a lot of knowledge on how to go out into the world and encounter people, and determine what it is they can do to help them. I met a lady that was there, she's gone away. Her name was Diane and she was Indian, which I mean native American. So, I had a little bit of a bond with her. She became my friend before I even knew that she was a counselor at Join [inaudible 00:12:54] homeless. I just happened to be homeless in my truck. She just happened to be coming around. It took me about a month to realize, wait a minute, this girl is part of some organization that wants to help me. That she was also a native American and she also had dreams and goals, just like the homeless people do.

She shared her stuff with me, just I shared my stuff with her. She achieved that. She's no longer in Join. She might be a teacher. Now she's a teacher. These are amazing people that do what they do. It takes a lot of effort on their part. It's more than just a job. They're involved with people's desperate situations and with people that really have these needs that are so overwhelming, and then they're limited in the way that they can

deal with that. Now, with regards to the homeless people, I am struggling with a lot of things that handicap you in trying to help homeless people. I judge. I don't lazy people and I don't drug addicts, and things like this.

But I think I've learned enough. I've grown enough in my experience that I check myself when I'm doing that. When I'm judging these people, when I'm going to put somebody in a category, homelessness or whatever. I got to stop myself because you know what? I've been involved with people enough where I can pass that judgment and I'm just going to pass them on this street. I'm going to see them. I'm going to find out that I was wrong. And I've done that enough times to realize man, oh man, homelessness is not a situation that you can look at and say, "Well, there's a bunch of drug addicts or lazy people, or ..." there's so many issues going on. There's so many different reasons why people are homeless and there's so much homelessness that is undeserved.

People that are struggling with stuff and people that really have the willpower and the heart, and the desire, and the willingness to work in whatever it takes to overcome their problem at the camp. Because their homelessness situation involves something that they need help with. Whether it be mental illness, whether it be addiction, whether it be abuse that they've been through, or whatever it is. I just know that Join is a place that they look at that. They try to identify what's going on.

Can't just help every person the same way. The only thing I can see about, when you asked me why I want to get back to Join. They did me well, took care of me and provided for me, and helped me, and encouraged me, and were there for me, and got me out of my problem. They helped me. I got myself out, but they helped me. Also, that I know by contributing to Join, if somebody looks around and they're like, "Oh, what, I want to donate somebody Salvation Army, this place I place, the other place." Me, I pick Join. Because I know that they make a difference and that they ... Those are the two reasons. I know that if I can get back to Join, somehow, if I can help Join do what they're doing, I'm helping somebody do a good thing.

Speaker 3:

The other two things that you had mentioned that I think, again, are really great examples for people who are housed, the idea of a neighborhood cleanup and a community garden, where did those come from? What do they look like?

Calvin:

Here's the thing you said. I'm a big person on dignity. I talk about people's dignity with regard to homelessness. I believe that a lot of homelessness is turning into chronic homelessness, or homeless situations become harder and harder to solve. When a person ... I'm going to say degenerates or deescalates or whatever, to a point where

they can't take care of the personal hygiene, they ain't got no clean clothes to wear, they can't shave, they can't get up in the morning and put their best foot forward, they ain't got nothing to eat, and that person there, and then the problem comes and there's nobody there to help them or nothing. What are they going to do? Get up in the morning and go get a job? No. Nobody could, you couldn't, I couldn't, nobody could in that situation. But big time with dignity, for me, is that we need to try to help people maintain their dignity. Give them the ability to put their best foot forward. To try, to be able to give them the tools they need to try.

Now, these community gardens and these chances to go out and clean up trash in the community and these things like that, give a homeless person the dignity and the pride, or the pleasure, or whatever you want to call it, of being able to be a part of the community and do something that helps. They want be able to help in the community. They don't just want to be helped and just receive, and feel a bum. You know what I'm saying? Or feel like, "I can't do anything for anybody, but ..." They want an opportunity to be able to contribute something. That's why people are in CAC. That's why people come to them. We haven't been able to have our community garden this summer due to the pandemic and stuff, but I missed it. We did grow vegetables and gave them to the community. I miss being able to go out and clean up the trash and the neighborhoods we organize, and do the types of community or things that we organize. Once, we did a thing to help people with their taillights and running lights for their cars. Homeless people are living in their cars and sometimes they don't have the signals and the wherewithal to fix them or whatever.

Speaker 3:

Do you ever have people who are housed come out and work with you at the same time?

Calvin:

Absolutely. There's a lot of people in the community that they're trying to do when they listen to your podcast. They're trying to understand. One of the best ways to understand is to go get involved. There's groups that ... You'll see a Christian fellowship groups or youth groups, things like this, cleaning up. These community type things are teaching kids a sense of community. Y'all see them come along and they'll come to learn, work with us on a neighborhood cleanup project, and they'll work alongside homeless people. Maybe, in that way, they get a lot of understanding of, "Wow, this is really a person they're out there cleaning up for no ... Donating their time. Maybe they're not such a bad person. It's just a homeless person having a hard time and they're trying to fix it."

I'm a champion of the dignity thing, of trying to find people. Of course, there's that outreach work that goes along that that says, "Okay, here's where we can ... Let's focus

here, on some clean tops on a clean pair of clothes, an ID card, an opportunity to get a job, or provide the first and last month's rent of housing," whatever on that whole scope of things that Join can do to help a person. Mental health issues, a bunch of addiction. Well, if you go in a day room, you're going to see a bunch of mental health tissues, a bunch of addiction, a bunch of strife and struggling. If you could just imagine, "Well, let me go in this room and figure out, okay, how am I going to help that person? How am I going to help that person? How am I going to help that person?" You could be a genius, you still wouldn't be able to ... You'd have to get that person, talk with him, understand what's going on with him. There's a lot of stuff you'd have to do before you can even decide, "Should I give 'em five bucks," or, "Should I sign them up on the shower list," or, "Is this person ready to go get a job," or, "What's going on? Where is this person, this person need drug treatment," or, "Does this person need mental health treatment," or, "What's going on?"

Speaker 3:

If I can interrupt for a second, because you are answering so many of the questions that I hear from people who are housed all the time. One of the things that I think people who are housed really don't understand is that this model that Join uses, which in the shop talk is person centered, so it's approaching everyone, as you describe, as an individual and understanding them, takes time. It's like you're saying. You have to know a whole lot to know whether this is going to work, or this is going to work, and you got to try the things out. I think that people who are housed don't understand the importance of the relationships that you're talking about. And that developing them take time and they have to be prioritized. So, thank you. Because I think you have illustrated that just so beautifully. What was helpful to you that people who were housed did while you were houseless, or what do you think people who are housed could do to better support people while they're waiting for housing?

Calvin:

For me, when I was struggling with homelessness, and what helped me, what people did for me that helped. Somebody to talk to about what's going on in your life. If somebody, you can open up and be honest with and not be embarrassed about your situation while I'm broke. I don't have the wherewithal. I need to be over to the other side of town and try to see about a job. I need to ... Whatever it is that you have to do, you don't have the ability to do that. Sometimes, even if you don't have the ability to do that, and somebody doesn't have the ability to give you what you need to do that. Still, it's okay. It helps to be able to talk to somebody. Then maybe you can come up with a solution, but it helps to be able to talk.

It sure helps to be able to ... There's the basic need. If somebody says, "Come on over to my house and let's have a cup of coffee, I'll fix you breakfast," or, "Do you need to



wash a load of clothes," or, "Do you need to take a shower?" I get that down and dirty with it with homeless people. I'll help somebody and I'm not naive. You got to be really careful with that type of thing. I wouldn't recommend that everybody in the community go out and certainly letting the homeless people come over their house and wash your clothes. People that takes time and a lot of people won't even see. With me, you won't see how hard my situation is because I'm not going to let you know. Because there's an amount of pride involved. But the people that do see you notice ... Usually the reason that they see us because they bother to stop and listen. So, then they see. And then that gives them the ability to try to offer some help if they're so inclined.

Speaker 3:

It's amazing to me how far that can go. I remember one day, somebody in my building who was mostly experiencing homelessness, dropped their scarf. I just instinctively bent down and picked it up and handed it to them. They were like, "Thank you so much for doing that. Most people would never have done that."

Calvin:

I get that, yeah.

Speaker 3:

Just the image of that, just basic humanity and what that can do, it just sounds to me, you're talking about neighbors helping neighbors.

Calvin:

Yeah. Then, it goes on and being ... How can somebody help you? I received help by literally being able to wash a little clothes at somebody's house. Maybe sleeping on somebody's couch. Maybe parking my van in their driveway. Just whatever it took to get through to a point now I'm not homeless anymore. I live in a home and I pay my rent. I am fairly secure. I got my mental health treatment now, that was the issue with me, I needed mental health treatment. I'm okay now. But help getting through that process, there were people to help me. I guess you have to love, have compassion, care about somebody a little bit. That makes a big difference.

Speaker 3:

Compassion can go a long way.

Calvin:

It can go a long way. If you have compassion, you really give a shit. And somebody can see that. I just don't know what the solution to the problem is. I know how people helped me. They helped me materialistically, opening up their house to me, having compassion for me, helping me, coming up with ideas for me, and pointing me in the right direction.

Anybody can end up homeless. I think maybe a lot more people might know that today after going through the pandemic than they did before. And then we might have a little more hard lessons to learn along the way but ...

Speaker 3:

When I talk to people who are housed and who are still trying to work through compassion, and still trying to really work through how to show up, they'll ask me, "Well, how can I help?" I'll say, "Just be a neighbor, start by saying hi to someone, ask somebody how their day is and have a chat." Then they're like, "Okay, well, what organization should I give money to, or, "Do we need camps or this, this and this." I'm like, "But what I said was to just start saying hi to people, learn someone's name." And yet they immediately pivot away. What you're describing is exactly what people need to be doing, but they have a hard time hearing. Maybe hearing it from you, they can be more open to the idea. You've talked about your experiences with homelessness throughout the discussion. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Calvin:

Try to understand what's going on. Try to take a look at the ... Don't assume that to know what's going on. Even if the evidence might seem overwhelming. You're looking at these people, these people are bums, they ain't got to ... Try to get knowledge, to understand by getting on your podcast or getting involved in any of the ways, there's a lot of ways the community can be involved in helping the homeless. And I've seen them do it, and they do it well. There's a lot of love there. People that are handing out of hot bone soup in the wintertime, and people that are going around the homeless camps and they're trying to love those people, and help them and see if they need anything. There's a lot of that. I think those people that do that might not sound like a fun thing to do with your day off, it's definitely going to be a learning experience. If you care, then you can at least understand the issue and how you're going to vote on a bill, or how you're going to attribute your time, or what you're going to do to help. At least you can have some knowledge to be able to try to do that.

Speaker 3:

I think this is great, Calvin. You've given us so much great information, and I can't thank you enough for sharing your story like this. You have learned how to tell your story beautifully.

Calvin:

Well, my teacher, she's with you.

Speaker 3:

Y'all have done some remarkable work and have an amazing, amazing story.

Jessica Mathis:

He did such a good job.

Calvin:

Means a lot to me that she says I did a good job because I couldn't have did this a couple of months ago, to give impact statements, to influence policy, to help people to make decisions that are going to work. That's what we're trying to do.

Speaker 3:

Jessica, how will people share their stories going forward?

Jessica Mathis:

I want to start by saying this makes me just so happy that people can speak for themselves. One of the things, almost makes me cry, it's so personally painful thing. I would go with people to agencies, DHS, and people would say something for themselves, and then they wouldn't get hurt. I would go with them. I would repeat the exact same thing, but as a professional, and all of a sudden things happened. So, for me, it's first and foremost where people want to share their stories, but we're hoping to bring people to implementation meetings for-

Speaker 3:

Housing Services [inaudible 00:28:58]?

Jessica Mathis:

Yes. We're hoping that folks are able to inform how and where we direct services, or how those services are created. Because it's not just enough to have the money for those things. They need to be put in the right pots. I think the people who've received those services or who've been through the systems should be the ones leading those conversations. I think a lot of a have good intentions, but not any practical experience. I think that's the next place. But I think we want people everywhere they want to be. I don't think there should be breakdown. I think the one positive thing about the pandemic is I really hope that these spaces remain accessible. While there definitely is a tech divide and that is something that we've worked with, at least people have the chance. We work with a lot of folks with disabilities or people who are parenting, and they can't necessarily take the time out of their day at two to four o'clock to drive 60 miles to a capital, or to show up at a space. So, I guess that was a very long way of saying, everywhere. More importantly, with this supportive services measure and making sure that we are actually using the money in the way that benefits-

Speaker 3:

For listeners, Supportive Housing Services measure was the major, major revenue measure that many of y'all voted to support last or two years ago now. It's Metro wide, revenue measure that is going to provide unparalleled money for supportive services and eviction prevention, and housing stability for people who have experienced homelessness or are on the cusp of homelessness. This is a very unusual measure. We have very few measures in the country, or revenue streams in the country, that allow for such an investment in supportive services. Seeing how all of this work is connected. There's the policy groups, there's the way things are getting implemented. There's the lived experiences that people can help inform these policy processes. It's a lot of work and a lot of intricacy, and there's some really great people working on all of these things behind the scenes. Jessica, any last thoughts?

Jessica Mathis:

I think if I had to ask of people just one thing, we do a lot of work to prepare people to be heard by other people. Calvin, for example, is an amazing person and has so much knowledge. We're not working to make him more knowledgeable. We're working to be able to have to-

Calvin:

Get the knowledge out.

Jessica Mathis:

To get the knowledge out.

Calvin:

Get it out of the brain in a way that people can understand [inaudible 00:31:44].

Jessica Mathis:

What I need for other people is to listen. You are in a position to take the time to listen, you have the stability, the education. If I had one thing, if I could say one thing, it's just if people would just take the time to listen to people, even when it sounds like maybe they're not saying exactly what you want to hear, how to hear it. But to listen to people, and just meet people where they're at, but truly meet people where they're at. None of these folks ... We're not putting ideas in people's heads. We're helping people present their ideas. I think I would just ask that people make that process easier by truly listening to people, and not discounting people because they don't speak the way that you do, or they don't have the same abilities that you do.

Speaker 3:

If I can add to that, one of the things I work with my students a lot on in planning, is that we're asking people to learn how to share their stories and their knowledge in ways that

are about dominant societal positions. We are having to spend time, and people who have this knowledge and these experiences are having to spend time learning, to share information and ways that college educated middle and upper class people have been trained to receive messages. We start to often turn off. House people, college educated, will turn off if we start to hear somebody with a more wandering story. Because they're not telling their story efficiently or effectively. That's how we label it, as opposed to what you're talking about, Jessica, listening where people are at. People are giving their stories and their messages. Sometimes, that's actually very culturally specific. I'm from a storytelling tradition. We got long stories. It's wonderful that y'all are doing this work. It's amazing that Calvin is committed to trying to do this. It's also something that we shouldn't have to need to do, is that if people would just listen more, we could skip the part of helping people tell their stories in a way that translates to bureaucracy, or translates to middle and upper class values.

Jessica Mathis:  
Exactly.

Speaker 3:  
Thank you so much for making time for us and for sharing so much. It was really beautiful and just y'all are doing great.

Speaker 2:  
That was Jessica and Calvin from Welcome Home Coalition, a group of organizations working together to advance the idea that everyone deserves a place to call home. To learn more, go to [welcomehomecoalition.org](http://welcomehomecoalition.org). To learn more about Join, the organization Calvin mentioned, go to [joinpdx.org](http://joinpdx.org). And, as always, to find out more about the podcast, including additional episodes and recommended reading, go to [understandinghomelessness.org](http://understandinghomelessness.org). Thank you for listening.