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## Bikes are one way back on track

• Volunteers offer green mobility options to homeless and low-income

air

Keywords

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Any

Writer

"I'm going back to school, and I have no means of transportation," says a 40-something man who has stopped by the Community Cycling Center's table at Project Homeless Connect, hoping for some help.



L.E. BASKOW / TRIBUNE PHOTOS

The Community Exchange Bike School's Steven Kung works on a wheel for Jim Reynolds (left) during a volunteer shift last week at Project Homeless Connect.

The event, held last week at the Oregon Convention Center, marked the first time that the Portland project has had a full transportation team.

Since 2005, cities across the country have participated in Project Homeless Connect, a

day event providing homeless and low-income individuals and families with one-stop access to services ranging from housing assistance to medical, dental and legal needs.

Portland hosts two Project Homeless Connect events each year, one in January for single adults, and one in September geared to families in need.

Jay Dean, the adult

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programs coordinator for the nonprofit Community Cycling Center, tells the would-be student about the Create a Commuter program. Run by the Community Cycling Center, it provides bikes and cycling education to low-income adults.



Applicants must not have a car, must fall below an income limit and must be referred by a third party, such as a caseworker.

“I’m going through Central City Concern,” the man says.



Dean nods. Central City Concern can verify the man’s status and sign him up for the Create a Commuter program online.



For the event, transportation team leader Chris Smith, a self-described citizen transportation activist and publisher of the blog [Portlandtransport.com](http://Portlandtransport.com), helped coordinate staff and volunteers from the Bicycle Transportation Alliance, Trauma Nurses Talk Tough, Metropolitan Family Service, the Community Cycling Center and the Portland Office of Transportation.



This team provided a range of services designed to make cheap, healthful, emission-free bike transportation accessible — and safe — for attendees.



“We’re trying to help this population have access to jobs, which is one step on the ladder out of homelessness,” Smith says. “Bikes are good options.”



### **Bikes get a break**

One new service at the event this year was free bike repair from volunteer mechanics, using tools provided by the Community Cycling Center. Video and audio producer Dan Kaufman from Internet-based CrankMyChain! Cycle TV took the first shift.



“I like to help folks get their bicycles going, because transportation is such a key element of getting back on your feet,” Kaufman says. “If you have a bike that you could get fixed and that allows you the freedom of mobility, I think that could really help to change a person’s life.”



The first bike on the rack needs a brake adjustment.



“That was easy to fix,” Kaufman says, “just needed some tightening.”



The bike’s owner takes advantage of other Homeless Connect services while Kaufman goes to work on the gears.



Not five feet away, Sara (who declines to give her last name) brings her husband, Kieran, and three small children to the Trauma Nurses Talk Tough tables for free bike helmets.



Based at Legacy Emanuel Hospital, the group provides discounted and free helmets to help reduce the number of kids and adults brought into trauma centers each year. This is the group’s first time at the Homeless Connect event.



Today, 20 volunteers help people get sized for helmets, choose from the many colors and styles available, and have the helmet adjusted for a secure fit.

“We do ride a lot,” Sara says. “Not to work and back, but when we go visit people.”

Her oldest child, Kira, has her own bike, and the youngest rides in a trailer.

Kira picks out a purple helmet. Her younger sister, Zae-Sha K, chooses a pink helmet with blue teddy bears. Baby brother Kieran gets a bright yellow helmet decorated with Sesame Street characters.

“Toddler helmets account for almost a third of the helmets I go through,” says Mike Morrison, a trauma nurse and educator who organizes the group’s

bike helmet programs. He sits on the floor and adjusts little Kieran's helmet, then shows Sara how to make adjustments.

Zae-Sha K stands by, beaming beneath her new pink helmet. "So cute!" Morrison exclaims.

The free helmets may have been the biggest draw, but the transportation team had much more to offer.

"Come for the bike helmet, stay for the map!" jokes Timo Forsberg, staffing PDOT's Transportation Options table and offering walking and bike maps and information about cycling laws and safety. "You want to know where you're going when you're looking stylish in your helmet."

New cyclists frequently pick bike routes based on how they would drive the same distance, without taking things like safety and scenery into account.

"We try to encourage cyclists to think about picking their route carefully," Forsberg says. "You can go pretty much as fast on Ankeny on a bike as you could in a car on Burnside, and you'll have a much better experience."

### **Dumpsters yield treasure**

There are no figures on the percentage of Portland's homeless who rely on bicycles to get around, but Smith and the event's transportation team say it's high. These bikes come from all over — thrift stores, garage sales, the Create a Commuter program, even the trash.

Back at the bike stand, Kaufman works on a bent rim. Someone found the beat-up cruiser he's fixing in a Dumpster.

"He said they find bikes in the trash all the time," Kaufman says. "This is a good commuting-around-town bike."

Kaufman straightens the rim, goes to work on a dented fender, then takes the bike for a spin before the final verdict: "It needs some air."

He's disappointed not to do more repairs on his early shift. On his way in, he saw lots of bikes outside in need of repair, and put up a sign alerting people to the free service.

"I'll just start going out there and grabbing people," he says, laughing: "Your bike needs to be fixed!"

Working the later shift, volunteer Steven Kung bears the brunt of the repair work. Smith explains that a lot of people saw the free repairs in the morning, and then left and came back with their bikes.

At the end of the day, the transportation team had given away 560 bike helmets and 100 flashing taillights. The Create a Commuter program had 22 new registrations and 65 referrals. The volunteer mechanics had repaired 14 bikes — plus a stroller and a wheelchair.

"We improvised," Smith says.

Kaufman was willing to work on whatever came his way.

"What if I was in a position where I didn't have a job at all? I couldn't get a job, I couldn't afford a bus ticket, you know? If I could get my hands on a bike, and could keep it working, that I think could put a person in the right direction."

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### **Find out more**

- CrankMyChain! Cycle TV

[www.crankmychain.com](http://www.crankmychain.com)

- Project Homeless Connect

[www.portlandhomelessconnect.com](http://www.portlandhomelessconnect.com)

- Bicycle Transportation Alliance

503-226-0676, [www.bta4bikes.org](http://www.bta4bikes.org)

- Community Cycling Center

1700 N.E. Alberta St., 503-287-8786, [www.communitycyclingcenter.org](http://www.communitycyclingcenter.org)

- Metropolitan Family Service

1808 S.E. Belmont St., 503-232-0007, [www.metfamily.org/](http://www.metfamily.org/)

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