

Poor, distraught and desperate: Oregon man threatens suicide on floor of state Senate

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The state capitol building in Salem, Oregon, was disrupted for an hour last week when a distraught 54-year-old man, swearing loudly and carrying a 10-inch knife, walked into the Senate chamber and threatened to kill himself.

The incident was caught on the building's internal video system. Boyd A. Owens entered the Oregon Senate Chamber a few minutes before lawmakers were to convene their 11:15 a.m. floor session on Monday, January 31. Police said 15 people were in the chamber and fled as Owens took a seat at the base of the Senate president's podium, holding a knife in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

An Oregon lawmaker who also is a physician attempted to talk to Owens before a trained police negotiator took over. Before Owens surrendered peacefully an hour later, much of the building had been overrun by officers with the Oregon State Police and sharpshooters. As he was escorted handcuffed down the capitol steps, Owens turned to reporters and TV cameras. "I'm disabled!" he screamed. "I need housing! That's all!"

Owens was taken to a hospital for a mental evaluation. Police said that he faces charges of second-degree criminal mischief, menacing and disorderly conduct.

The response by state lawmakers and the state media was fast and unanimous. Much was made of the fact that elsewhere in the building, representatives from the Oregon chapter of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill were visiting to lobby lawmakers. Also, the issue raised—for politicians and media commentators, at least—the need to beef up security at the state capitol.

Stemming from the first assumption, of course, is the notion that anyone driven to do such a thing clearly is suffering from a mental illness. Two days later, the *Oregonian* expressed hope that security issues, real or illusory, would be dealt with quickly so lawmakers could "get back to the real business in Salem, such as

addressing the needs of the mentally ill, of which the intruder was apparently a sad reminder."

The Salem *Statesman-Journal*, meanwhile, gently suggested that perhaps people were too carried away with security issues and not paying enough attention to the apparent cause of Owens's distress.

"Oregon will waste no time improving security so the state's most powerful people feel safe in the Capitol," an editorial observed on February 2. "How long before people with mental illness get the help they need?"

More information about Owens was reported in the following week, as family members and friends spoke with the media. While suggesting that the man was indeed troubled and had had some minor scrapes with police, the picture that's emerged seems less a clear-cut case of someone who is wholly irrational by virtue of a mental illness than first reported.

Boyd lived four blocks from the capitol in a seven-story apartment building. Interviews by the media with family revealed that after having troubles with drugs and alcohol in the 1980s, he had found some stability in his life. Shortly after he began attending a local church, he suffered from an aneurysm that nearly killed him.

Following three brain surgeries at Oregon Health Sciences University in Portland, Boyd recovered slowly while living in a series of care homes. Unable to work, he began to get \$500 a month in Social Security disability checks.

Boyd's sister, Sonya Gaub, told reporters that her brother applied in 2001 for a Section 8 federal housing subsidy and was denied. Although state officials would not disclose what had disqualified Boyd, his sister's remarks suggested that he had run into rules prohibiting help for those with a criminal background. He was told at the time that he could reapply in three years.

"No matter how hard you try and what the circumstances, I don't think people realize that the system

will not help former felons,” she told the *Statesman-Journal*.

Boyd currently pays \$388 for a studio apartment. On Friday, two days before he burst into the capitol building, he visited the Salem Housing Authority office to inquire once again about a housing voucher. He was reportedly told that he could apply and join a waiting list with nearly 4,000 households ahead of him, which amounts to a two-year wait.

“Friday afternoon he found out that he had to be put on a waiting list, and he just went crazy,” Gaub told Portland TV station KATU. Others who knew Boyd expressed their surprise by his actions. “He’s a very peaceful person,” Bill Sandhu, who attended Boyd’s church, told reporters. “He’s never shown any sign of violence or of bad-mouthing anybody.”

Oregon’s media seems to have contented itself with writing Boyd off as simply a “crazy” person who acted out inappropriately. Salem, the *Statesman-Journal* noted lazily, “seems to have an added share of troubled people.”

That isn’t to say that there aren’t thousands of mentally ill men and women in Oregon who are in desperate need of help—housing, medication, and the like. They may very well find sympathetic sound bites from state and local officials, but less forthcoming is meaningful help. Oregon has, in recent years, already seen a wave of cuts in programs for the mentally ill.

More indicative of the social crisis, however, is the complete absence from either political party or the state’s media pundits of any serious, rational discussion of the real, objective conditions that, among other things, have compelled people from nearly 4,000 households to seek housing assistance in Salem alone.

What has raced to the top of the agenda for Oregon’s big business politicians, at least for the moment, is the vital need to shield themselves from occasional outbursts of rage by the broader public.



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