

HVJ Fall 2024 Voting Guide

Portland City Council At-Large

Every election season, Homeless Voices for Justice (HVJ) creates educational voter material and visits several community locations to register people to vote. This year, we sent all candidates a series of questions and have published all of their answers here.

HVJ is a grassroots organization that works for social change with, and on behalf of, people experiencing homelessness and poverty. HVJ is led by organizers who have all experienced homelessness. The founding group in Portland has existed since 1995, and we network in other locations across Maine. Our goal is to build a coalition for, and of, people experiencing homelessness and poverty throughout Maine. We seek to empower people experiencing homelessness and poverty whose perspectives are often excluded from the development of policies and programs that impact their social and economic wellbeing. Disenfranchisement, oppression, and marginalization creates this absence. Therefore, we hope to assert ourselves and our interests in Maine politics through protest, education, positive policy change and reform.

HVJ meets every Monday morning from 9:30-11:30am and is welcoming of everyone who has experienced, or is currently experiencing, homelessness.

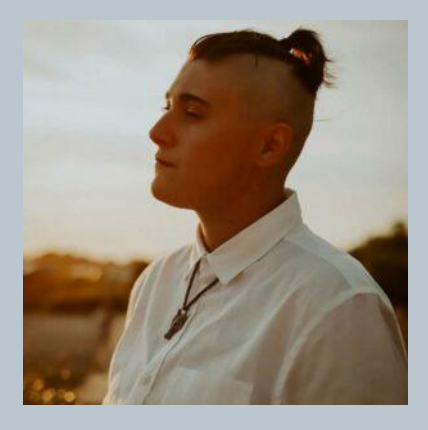
For more information, email HVJ@preblestreet.org or call 207-899-6042 with questions.

Are you registered
to vote?

Visit vote.org to
register and see
what's on your ballot



Portland City Council – At Large



Jess Falero



Ben Grant



Grayson Lookner



Brandon Mazer



Jacob Viola



Jess Falero (they/them)



- Current Position:
 - Advocacy Director
 - Community health specialist for the Church of Safe Injection
- Issues and Priorities:
 - Housing
 - Climate
 - Social services
 - Unions
 - Stronger democracy

Ben Grant (he/him)



- Current Position:
 - Labor lawyer
 - At-large member of the Portland School Board
- Issues and Priorities:
 - Housing
 - Unhoused
 - Education
 - Public Health
 - City Workers
 - Public Transportation
 - Climate & Environment
 - Working Waterfront



Grayson Lookner (he/him)



- Current Position:
 - Theater tech at Merrill Auditorium
 - Seasonal kayaking guide in Casco Bay
 - Representative of District 113
- Issues and Priorities:
 - Housing
 - Homelessness
 - Environment & Climate Change
 - Health & Safety
 - Transportation
 - Schools
 - City Staff
 - Working Waterfront



Brandon Mazer (he/him)



- Current Position:
 - Lawyer in private practice with a focus on municipal law
- Issues and Priorities:
 - Preservation of our parks and open space
 - Great K-12 schools
 - Equity in our communities
 - More affordable housing
 - Fiscal responsibility
 - Environmental sustainability

Jacob Viola



- Current Position:
 - Unknown
- Issues and Priorities:
 - Govern responsibly
 - Make Portland affordable
 - Win the future



Jacob Viola did not respond to HVJ's questionnaire.

In your opinion, what are the most urgent issues facing the city of Portland?

Jess Falero:

"Homelessness, Housing, and Climate Change"

Ben Grant:

"Housing and education. We have not kept up with the demand for housing - with many downstream negative effects, including homelessness and overall affordability. Education should always be a top priority for all elected leaders - and Portland is on a good trajectory right now..but we can always do better."

Grayson Lookner:

"The lack of affordable housing for low and middle income earners, need for more support services for people experiencing homelessness, education, and climate mitigation strategies which includes investing in public transit."

Brandon Mazer:

"Affordable Housing, Homelessness, and Public Safety"

Jacob Viola:

No response was received.



If you were to distinguish yourself from your opponent(s) for voters, what would you highlight as three critical differences?

Jess Falero:

"I have almost a decade in lived experiences of homelessness in the city. My run for office is fueled by my lived experiences and the grief I hold from the people we've lost on the streets. I believe both of those things coupled by my years of social change work that started while I was still unhoused makes me uniquely qualified for this position."

Brandon Mazer:

"First, I want to say that I respect anyone who is willing to put themselves out there and run for office. As to your question, I respect all viewpoints and can only speak to what I believe I can bring to the city council if elected. Over the last 15 years, I have been heavily involved in our community, serving on a variety of volunteer boards. Additionally, my experience on the Planning Board and as a land use lawyer for towns and cities across the state has given me invaluable insight and knowledge about municipal government. I strongly believe I can make a difference with a common sense, cooperative approach representing all the voices of Portland in addressing the unprecedented challenges facing our city."

Ben Grant:

"Breadth of experience. Tackling big policy challenges requires mastery of many things: moving the bureaucracy, creating coalitions with colleagues, developing creative solutions, and managing the media - just to name a few. I am unique in the breadth of my experiences working in the public eye - from the Portland School Board to Chairing the Maine Democratic Party to Co-Chairing Governor Mills's transition team to working on behalf of labor unions across Maine. I know how to move tough issues. Values. I have spent my professional career in the Labor movement, representing private and public sector unions - as well as hundreds of individual working people - in all matter of problems. This care and advocacy for working people drives all of what I do. Community involvement. My wife (Cate) and I have lived here for almost 25 years, and our two daughters (11 and 15) are in the public schools. I have been involved through the School Board, PTO (Ocean Ave. Elementary) and PAYSA, and Cate has provided health care for hundreds of Portlanders while working for Greater Portland Health. We have deep ties, and a deep commitment, to this community."

Grayson Lookner:

"I am a solution seeker, I have the most concrete plan and the most experience working on the housing crisis of any candidate in the race. I want the city to implement a "social housing developer" which would directly finance and develop mixed-income housing that remains affordable in perpetuity. In addition to addressing the housing crisis, and providing another means of building low and middle income housing, social housing would also provide an additional source of revenue to put towards housing and support services for people experiencing homelessness. I have worked with youth and adults experiencing homelessness as a behavioral health professional. Further, my work on housing justice is central to my work in the legislature. In Augusta, I helped to pass bills to invest millions of dollars into housing first programs, support services, emergency shelters, and low-income housing. But, we have a lot more work to do. I believe housing is a human right, and I will not stop working for housing justice until that goal is achieved."

Jacob Viola:

No response was received.

What is your plan to address the root causes of homelessness and help people experiencing homelessness in your district find safe and stable housing?

Jess Falero:

"Supporting the expansion of housing first projects in the city would be my first and foremost. Asking anyone to accomplish anything without a roof over their head is not going to accomplish anything and goes against the Maslow's hierarchy of needs. My second would be to create a sustainable plan for a warming shelter in the winter, the hsc is not a one size fits all solution and we need to make space for the people that it doesn't serve. My third would be to establish vacancy fees on luxury condos that go unoccupied and use that money to directly fund unhoused service programs."

Ben Grant:

"I am a proponent of the Housing First approach to homelessness. We need more housing starts, and more projects specifically dedicated to getting people off the street. I have also learned the the housing voucher system is not really sufficient - and if we can work with other government partners to boost those payments, we can find people more housing. The root causes are much harder - but I would start with (a) a public health mindset to treating underlying mental health and addiction issues, (b) working with individuals to complete or further their education, and (c) ensuring an economy that provides job opportunities for people all across incomes."

Brandon Mazer:

"We need to approach the issue of homelessness first with compassion and with continued efforts to secure safe housing and support services for the homeless. The Jill Duson Housing Trust Fund and other options to incentivize affordable housing development need to be explored, as does simplifying the permitting process. I would also explore additional support services utilizing the Opioid Settlement funds to address substance abuse and continue to foster partnerships with local non-profits that provide those support services."

Jacob Viola:

No response was received.

Grayson Lookner:

"To implement a social housing program to create mixed-income housing that remains affordable in perpetuity. Using a bond, we can go into partnership with other non-profit developers to create the type of housing we need. This will also create a source of revenue for services if necessary. This is another source of housing development that does not compete with existing forms of low-income and subsidized housing. In Augusta, I continue to work to make sure the entire state is doing its fair share for a statewide crisis. Other towns are not doing their part to provide for their neighbors who are experiencing homelessness. These individuals should not be forced to move to a big city far from whatever limited support networks they may have, therefore other towns should do their part by allowing shelters. I introduced a bill that would have prohibited other towns from banning emergency shelters like Lewiston did last year. Although that bill didn't pass, I'm pleased that Lewiston has announced it will allow a shelter. This will be good for the city of Portland, and good for individuals experiencing homelessness in Lewiston so they can stay near their families and friends. Additionally, we need to support and expand existing housing first programs and shelters, and combat NIMBYism that might create opposition to expanding these programs."

Many communities are finding success with Housing First programs, which prioritize getting people into housing quickly with supportive services. What is your position on the Housing First approach, and would you support a Housing First location in your district?

Jess Falero:

"As someone who lived at the Florence House I know that benefits first hand. When you give someone a roof, their own space, and support services you will watch them steadily make changes in their life that prompt full quality. Housing first is also crucial because no matter where you are in life or your drive to improve you deserve a roof over your head and your basic humanity."

Ben Grant:

"See above - yes, I do support this approach and I think this type of construction is viable in all Districts in Portland."

Grayson Lookner:

"Absolutely. How can a person get a job, address their mental health needs, and maintain recovery if they don't have a place to live? Getting people into housing is critical to address these other needs, and housing first is the most effective and evidenced-based intervention for the myriad factors that lead to homelessness. I live near a housing first facility (Huston Commons), and you would never know it was a supported-living environment unless you visited. It's quiet, clean, and a good addition to the neighborhood."

Brandon Mazer:

"I agree that Housing First programs are seeing success in communities across the country. If properly licensed and managed, I think Housing First could be a great benefit to getting people into housing quickly. However, to make this work we need to tackle some of the internal City policies that are prohibiting housing from getting built generally, such as the time consuming and expensive permitting process."

Jacob Viola:

No response was received.



Would you allow Portland residents to sleep outdoors?

Jess Falero:

"Yes, the approaches we've taken as a city have caused irreparable harm to the unhoused community. We can agree that no one deserves to sleep outside. However, the harms we cause by institutionalizing people are something we are not going to solve by arresting or sweeping our way out of it."

Ben Grant:

"For the purpose of this answer, I am assuming the inference here is to the possibility of more restrictive City ordinances. If that is the case, I would not be in favor of some kind of blanket ban on sleeping outdoors. I don't think that approach is realistic or sufficiently compassionate. We can't, at the same time, fail to provide enough housing and also ban sleeping outdoors. That said, I have consistently stated I am opposed to the large, permanent encampments - which seems to cause more problems than they solve. I think we can realistically reduce homelessness in Portland with the strategies outlined elsewhere in these answers - and we cannot simply regulate our way out of the problem."

Grayson Lookner:

"We need to make sure there is adequate shelter space available that everyone experiencing homelessness can access. In the absence of this, I am opposed to criminalizing sleeping outdoors. We can and must do better as a city and a state when this becomes our best option."

Brandon Mazer:

"Experience has shown us that sleeping outdoors is not a safe or healthy option for people, especially in the harsh winter months. We need to continue to encourage those experiencing homelessness to utilize the Homeless Services Center or other services provided throughout the City and to continue to work with those individuals to find permanent housing."

Jacob Viola:

No response was received.



How do you plan to address the problem of food insecurity in the city of Portland and ensure that people in your district have enough food to achieve an active, healthy lifestyle?

Jess Falero:

"Within my social justice work I have led mass mutual aid events and raised money to obtain groceries for many people in our community. My core values are founded on the belief that everyone deserves access to basic necessities and human rights. And I can confidently say this will be displayed in my decisions if I'm elected to council."

Ben Grant:

"I am proud of the commitment the State has made to make school lunch free for all children in Maine, regardless of income. It was an important step for some of our most vulnerable. Beyond that, the best long-term approach is to improve the education and employment opportunities for people in Portland so they can provide what they need for themselves and their families. Of course, there will always be need - so I would want to get input from social service providers and grocers/shopkeepers about how to make the system work for everyone."

Grayson Lookner:

"I support fully investing in whatever programs Portland has to deliver food to people, and to support the non-profits that are doing this work. We need to ensure that the entire city is safe for pedestrians, cyclists, and other people who get around without using cars. Key to this is to make sure that the METRO bus service has the resources it needs to serve the whole city at all times of day, so it's a service that everyone can use without inconvenience."

Brandon Mazer:

"As a community we need to ensure safe & healthy food for those in need, increase access to food and support the efforts of organizations providing these services. I want to continue to foster private/public partnerships that help address this issue, working with organizations such as the Locker Project."

Jacob Viola:

No response was received.



What is your opinion on Maine's Roadmap to End Hunger by 2030? Do you agree with the governor's office's approach to this issue?

Jess Falero:

"No one should go without food in a country with massive food waste. I will support any and all efforts to end hunger in the state."

Ben Grant:

"The Roadmap is an excellent jumping off point for all policy-makers. It is a compassionate, realistic, overview of the problem, the barriers, and possible solutions."

Grayson Lookner:

"Food insecurity, like housing insecurity, has a very simple solution: feed people and give them housing. Since food insecurity is so closely related to economics, like the cost of living, by creating avenues for more affordable housing, we can also address hunger. I support the roadmap, and read the report, but it's an awful lot of words to explain a very simple concept: give people access to food. There is nuance when it comes to race and disability, and people of color and those with disabilities are disproportionately affected by food insecurity, and those factors must be at the center of all the conversations."

Brandon Mazer:

"The goals of the Governor's plan are laudable and is well thought out. The results will measure its success."

Jacob Viola:

No response was received.



The opioid epidemic is one of the biggest public health crises in the state of Maine. What programs or initiatives would you support to address this issue within your district?

Jess Falero:

"My current job is the Advocacy Director and community health specialist for the Church Of Safe Injection. This means I lead national, state level, and local advocacy worked directly related to people that are unhoused and who use drugs. I helped build the needle exchange program that was based out of common space and I worked directly with people inside of the encampments on a daily basis. I would fight to fund and expand needle exchange programs in the city and work to expand detox centers as well as recovery based programs. Their is not a one size fits all solution; so I believe the more access the better."

Ben Grant:

"Addiction is different for everyone - and thus there is no one-size-fits-all answer. For some people, medication is the answer - for others it is total sobriety. I applaud Governor Mills for her dedication to the issue through the Opioid Response team, so we can be confident there are resources in this area. Specifically, we need more treatment beds and more front-line workers (with adequate pay!) to give the individualized attention that this problem requires. In a larger sense, we also need to be building strong communities so that fewer and fewer people fall through the cracks initially."

Brandon Mazer:

"The allocation of Opioid settlement funds provides the City with a tremendous opportunity to address substance abuse which is currently being reviewed for recommendations by the Council's HHS Committee. Further, I am a strong believer in creating public-private partnerships to help expand these resources. The City cannot do it on its own and needs to work with experts in the field."

Jacob Viola:

No response was received.

Grayson Lookner:

"Maine has taken some hopeful steps in recent years, and there are some reasons to be cautiously optimistic about the direction that we're heading. Overdose deaths have dropped, but we continue to lose 1-2 Mainers a day to overdose deaths, which is far too many. We cannot lose sight of how urgent this issue is, and how it affects everyone regardless of their political affiliation, social class, or any other factors. In the legislature, I introduced legislation to study how Overdose Prevention Centers might be implemented in towns in Maine. In other states and countries, this has been the single most effective intervention to reduce deaths, increase uptake in recovery services, and reduce public litter associated with drug use. This approach was supported by the City's nominating and legislative committee, and the Mayor has also publicly expressed support for this approach in the past. I think Portland should look at this idea seriously. It's promising that Milestone has expanded its facilities, and that there are more options for people who might not have insurance to get into detox and treatment. Portland should do whatever it can to ensure these services are available to anyone who needs them."



How do you plan to incorporate the perspectives of people with lived experience of homelessness and poverty into your policymaking?

Jess Falero:

"I have my own lived experiences but I also still have chosen family out on the streets. I was an advocate for HVJ in 2019 and I am well connected to the social workers who have boots on the ground. In everything i've done advocacy wise it has been in collaboration with people currently living outside or in the shelters. I believe that when we lift from the bottom everybody rises, and if I were to become a policy maker that wouldn't change."

Ben Grant:

"People just need to be asked. For elected officials, that means dedicating the time to go out and listen to people. It's as simple as that."

Grayson Lookner:

"In addition to my work with youth and adults experiencing homelessness and Substance Use Disorder in the past – which has informed all my work in my time in public service, there was also a period in my life in which I experienced housing instability for a period of several years. This was due to rampant real estate commodification, which has affected everyone who does not own property. Owning property should not be the only avenue to having stability in one's home. The voices of people who don't own property, the people who cannot afford or find a place to rent, and the voices of people with compounding mental health diagnoses, disability of various kinds, and other co-occurring disorders will be central to my decision making should I get elected to the Portland City Council."

Brandon Mazer:

"At a very basic level, we all need to start listening to each other. I pride myself on my ability to listen and understand all perspectives on any one issue, which I believe I have shown through my time on the Planning Board. We should strive to make meetings as accessible for anyone that wants to comment. Inclusive representation is a fundamental right and responsibility of elected officials."

Jacob Viola:

No response was received.

