



BENJAMIN BRINK/The Oregonian

Community Action Organization's new building at 1001 S.W. Baseline Road features an open design and consolidates services offered at five locations under one roof.



BENJAMIN BRINK/The Oregonian

The Community Action Organization building on Baseline Road in Hillsboro is only partly occupied. Work still is continuing on one segment of the building.



BENJAMIN BRINK/The Oregonian

Bill Boyk, who works with the Head Start program, puts the finishing touches on room dividers before occupants move in to the Community Action Organization building.

New look, new name

Community Action gets new home

By ANTJE SPETHMANN

of The Oregonian staff

COMMUNITY ACTION

■ **What:** A private, nonprofit organization serving the poor of Washington County.

■ **Service:** Head Start, child care, advocacy, emergency assistance, emergency shelter, housing services and housing development, parenting skills, homeless services, energy education and weatherization.

■ **Past successes:** Started the first crop gleaning program in the United States, according to director Jerralynn Ness. Started and ran the Washington County Food Bank.

■ **Phone:** Numbers for Community Action remain the same. Main office 648-6646, client assistance 648-0829, fax 648-4175.

After years of fund raising and planning, the Community Action Organization has moved into its new home. And, though the dust has yet to settle, for staff and clients it's a long-awaited dream that has come true.

"About eight-10 years ago, we started thinking about this," said Jerralynn Ness, executive director of the agency that dropped Washington County from its name with the move to 1001 S.W. Baseline St.

It was during the Reagan administration and social service programs were facing extensive budget cuts.

"We did not want to eliminate any services," Ness said.

So they began a capital campaign. The result is a \$3.2 million building in Hillsboro that opened last week.

Designed by Van Lom/Edwards and built by Silco, the building consolidates services formerly at five locations under one roof, allows an increase in meal production from 800 to 2,000 a day, provides spaces for other volunteer organizations that work in concert with CAO and saves \$100,000 a year in rent.

Head Start is the single biggest program CAO does. There are 11 sites throughout Washington County offering early child development for 360 children, only 23 percent of the eligible 3- and 4-year-olds in the county. About 20 percent of the Head Start children are disabled. All of them come from needy families.

The building has five classrooms that can accommodate up to 200 children in the half-day program that feeds each child twice — hence the need for the kitchen.

More than ever, Ness said, Washington County is feeling the need for the private nonprofit agency, which formed 30 years

ago. Ness said Census research shows that of the county's 350,000 or so residents, 40,000 face economic crisis such as a layoff or unforeseen medical costs each year. Ness estimates that CAO hears from 10,000 to 12,000 people who find themselves homeless each year.

"In our community, if you are earning money at the low end of the scale, you won't make it."

A family living on a minimum wage salary is hard-pressed to get by. At \$4.85 per hour, a worker's annual income would be \$10,088. Federal poverty level for a family of four is \$15,000.

"That's why an entry-level job at \$6.50 or \$7 just isn't going to make it," Ness said. "They are employed. They are working hard. They just cannot escape poverty."

Now that the big project is almost done — they won't have an occupancy permit for the rest of the building until later this month — Ness will lead the agency through a reassessment of its goals and mission.