

December 2, 1996

MEMO

To: Board Planning Committee
From: Jerralynn Ness
Subject: Faces of Poverty Rewrite

I received input from four staff and no input from Board members. I have summarized their input as follows:

General Comments:

Tone is much better.

Overall its much better; would still like to see fewer words and shorter sentences.

Would like to see more of the words that characterize emotion be eliminated, such as "struggle" and "distressing"

Nice introduction; it makes me want to read on

In the data section: Too many stats, I was confused. Use only county stats.

Page 10: Excellent

In addition, I've marked up the data section with info on sources and suggestions for changes. We still have some more work to do here.

The committee needs to decide if the direction Jim is going will improve the report to their satisfaction and if they're ready for him to finalize the Executive Summary and move on to the full report. Staff will work with Jim to make sure that the data included in the report is accurate and that to the extent possible we have identified the source.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The number of people who live in poverty in Washington County is growing, as it is in most of the United States. People who are *chronically* poor, who have formed their families and lived their whole lives in poverty, are being joined in increasing numbers by people who are *situationally* poor, who suddenly find themselves struggling economically because of some precipitating event. One of the county's most distressing trends is the increasing number of *working* poor families — those who have jobs but who don't earn enough to sustain a basic standard of existence.

Despite the current expansion of the county's poor population, it is clear from focus group meetings conducted for this report that the magnitude and extent of poverty remain largely unseen and unknown to many of us who live or work in Washington County. The reason may be that our concepts of poverty are too narrow, or are outdated, or are based on caricatures of the poor. Or, it may simply be that we do not personally

know anyone who struggles with poverty. Whatever the reason, we can only become better equipped to support or design programs that alleviate poverty in Washington County when we become better acquainted with poverty's symptoms and effects. It is hoped that this report, "The Face of Poverty in Washington County", will prove helpful toward that end.

The summary that follows touches on most topics explored in the full report, but it can do so only lightly, because the full report contains the analysis of a very large amount of detailed information; some of this is drawn from federal census data, some from reference documents, some from interviews, some from a survey conducted for this report, and some from focus group meetings held during the report's preparation phase. Readers with a special interest in particular topics are encouraged to look beyond this ~~superficial~~ Executive Summary, into the material of the main report itself.

The magnitude and extent of poverty remain largely unseen and unknown to many of us who live or work in Washington County.

*difficult word -
how about
"unexpected"?*

→ *poverty in*

←

The Real Face of Poverty

The real face of poverty in Washington County is reflected in the faces of Sheila, Victor, and their four children. Two years ago, Victor worked full time as a home insulator, and Sheila worked part time providing child care. Despite their two incomes, they couldn't keep up financially. Lacking health insurance, they couldn't afford regular doctor visits, so they relied on charity from urgent care facilities. The costs of medical prescriptions competed with their food budget. Food stamps didn't last the month. Housing required ^afederal subsidy to make it affordable. Any small problem could escalate rapidly into a financial crisis. "We had no choices," explains Sheila. "We could hardly afford groceries."

The real face of poverty is in the face of Katie, a single mother who lives in Tigard with her two children. Katie is resourceful, but even so, she can barely stretch her welfare income, housing subsidies, and food stamps far enough to cover her family's basic needs. For clothing and for

"anything big", her family is forced to rely on donations. Because she can't afford a car, Katie struggles daily with the public transportation system in Washington County. Her lack of mobility limits Katie's training opportunities, her employment options, and nearly every other aspect of her life. The single benefit of Katie's economic condition is that her son Greg qualifies for a Head Start program. Head Start supports Greg's special needs, which are for social development and speech therapy, so that he will be ready to start public school at the normal age, instead of being years behind.

Dreams and Frustrations

Sheila and Victor, Katie, their families and many others living in poverty in Washington County have much in common. They all struggle for fulfillment of life's basic needs. They can only dream of affordable housing, safe and healthy children, home ownership, and adequately paid employment close to home - things that most residents of the county can take

Affordable housing, safe and healthy children, home ownership, adequately paid employment -- things that most residents of the county can take for granted -- are just dreams to most of those living in poverty.

*Need to get
More Health Plan
info*

for granted. Too often, even their dreams must be put aside in the day-to-day struggle for survival. In part, they don't create plans for achieving their dreams because their dreams seem unachievable. They hold the pieces of their lives together in a delicate balance. When an unexpected problem or expense arises, they often lose any progress they may have made toward moving out of poverty.

for their children. They forego preventive health measures in order to meet other financial needs, and, lacking health insurance, they rely on emergency services when health problems erupt.

Perhaps worst of all is the feeling, consistently expressed by low income people, that their community is indifferent to their plight. Although by Washington County Community Action Organization's standards they make up nearly 20% of the county's population, they often feel forgotten in their struggle to provide for even the most basic of life's needs.

Figure 1. The Federal Poverty Level is the most common measure of poverty, but may more accurately measure "destitute" poverty. Many agencies — including CAO — use broader definitions of 150% or 200% of FPL as a program standard.

In their efforts to escape poverty, they face many obstacles. Often, their limited education makes technical training inaccessible. High housing costs make it impossible to save for future education for themselves or

Poverty by the Numbers

Statistics help clarify the picture of poverty in Washington County by revealing how many people face the conditions described. Statistics can also be used to show how the numbers change over time.

Poverty statistics from different sources are based on different definitions. Most government programs rely on the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) as the criterion for defining poverty.

Poverty in Washington County		
Percent of FPL Pre-tax Income Family of 4	Number of Wash. County Residents	Percent of Wash. County Residents
75% FPL (\$947 per month)	13,536	4.3%
100% FPL (\$1,263 per month)	20,198	6.6%
150% FPL (\$1,894 per month)	38,113	12.3%
200% FPL (\$2,525 per month)	62,275	20.2%

The FPL attempts to quantify the minimum amount of money that families of various sizes need to maintain a basic standard of existence. For example, at the time of the 1990 Federal Census, the FPL for a family of four was an annual income of \$12,674. Oddly, the FPL includes no geographic adjustments: it is the same everywhere in the nation, regardless of actual cost-of-living differences. This has special relevance to Washington County, which has one of the nation's least affordable housing markets.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provides another standard for evaluating poverty. The HUD guidelines, which, unlike the FPL, are specific to each community, compare the income of a family relative to the median income for the local area. The HUD guidelines define "low income" as 50% of the median income, or \$21,350 in Washington County at present. This represents 140% of the current FPL for a family of four, which is \$15,150.

for a family of 4

Some agencies and organizations use an even broader definition of poverty. Both the Oregon Health Division and Community Action Organization of Washington County use larger percentages of the FPL (150% to 200%) as the working definition of poverty-level annual income.

The Federal Census of 1990 shows that 20,198 people living in Washington County, or 6.6% of the total population, had annual incomes at or below the Federal Poverty Level. If a broader definition of the poverty level is used - income at or below 200% of the FPL (Figure 1) - then 62,275 people, or more than 20% of the county population, struggled economically and experienced the effects of poverty in 1990. (Note: The Portland State University study from which census statistics used for this report were drawn shows a 1990 Washington County population total of 311,554, but includes detailed demographic information on the slightly smaller total of 308,186. For consistency, analyses performed

More than 20% of the county population struggled economically and experienced the effects of poverty in 1990.

with update

question: is it important to include in Exec Summary?

Among Washington County's population of children five years old and under, nearly one in ten lives in poverty.

for this report reflect the detailed demographic information.)

The Federal Census survey examines not only income, but also such demographic characteristics of the nation's general population as race/ethnicity, age, and family structure. Analysis of the 1990 demographic census data for the 308,186 residents of Washington County, including the 20,198 residents with incomes at or below the 1990 Federal Poverty Level, reveals that:

- ❖ The poverty rate (poverty rate as used in this report is simply the percentage of a group below the FPL) for the county's white population is 5.8%, while the rate for the non-white population is 15.3%.
- ❖ The poverty rate for the county's Hispanic population (which may include people of any race) is 25.6%, nearly four times the rate for the county population as a whole.
- ❖ More than three-quarters of all poor families have one or more children, compared with just over half of

all families in the county. Single parent families make up 47% of all poor families, but only 10% of all families in the county. [PSU data say 15% of all families]

- ❖ Among Washington County's population of children five years old and under, nearly one in ten lives in poverty.
- ❖ Poor families can be found throughout Washington County, but are represented disproportionately in rural areas. [No data]
- ❖ Most poor families (65%) have a householder who works, but very few (7.5%) have a householder who works full time all year round. [No data]
- ❖ The vast majority of poor people (79%) do not receive welfare assistance. [PSU data say a minority of 41.3% do not]
- ❖ Families with a household member who is disabled make up 17% of all poor families, while they constitute only 6.5% of all families. [No data]

Factors Linked to Poverty

Analysis of census data is revealing, but it clarifies only some aspects of the factors that can be linked to poverty. Many of these factors, such as employment and education, are related directly. Others – like housing and child care – are less tangibly linked and less easily quantified in their relationship to poverty, yet they are also issues of much more importance to people of low income than they are to those who are less financially burdened. Factors consistently identified as being uppermost to people of low income are commented on below:

Employment [No data]

- ◆ It is generally accepted that wages of \$11 – \$13 per hour are required to keep a family with only one wage earner out of poverty. Although job growth in the county continues to be strong, most of the growth is in low-wage jobs earning less than \$7.00 per hour.

County Department of Housing Services Reported about \$11.34 per hour.

need source

Education

- opening comment*
- ◆ Participants in focus groups conducted during the preparation of this report, as well as those who responded to a related survey, consistently identified education as a key to achieving their dreams of economic self-sufficiency. In Oregon, the poverty rate is 37.7% for those with less than a fourth-grade education, 12.5% for those with a High School or GED diploma, 6.8% for those with a Bachelor's degree, and less than 5% for those with a graduate degree.

Housing [No data]

- ◆ Rental housing is unaffordable for 31% of families in Washington County.
- ◆ Average starter homes in Washington County cost more than twice what low-income families can afford.
- ◆ One in ~~five~~ people requesting emergency shelter must be turned away for lack of room.
- ◆ Farm workers living in labor camps are housed at twice the average per-room density of the entire

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→ may 95, Wash. Co. Dept. of Housing Services: Housing & Community development plan.

→ over

← CAD Homeless report, based on 92-93 service stats.

← CASA Farm Labor Survey 19--

waiting for info
from Virginia Garcia
clinic

checking on
accuracy of this

county. Nearly half of all labor camp housing facilities have no running water, toilets or source of heat.

Nearly one in seven Washington County residents has no form of health insurance.

Child Care [No data]

- ❖ Nearly two-thirds of poor parents cannot afford child care.
- ❖ Two-thirds of low-income single parents rely on informal, unpaid child care.
- ❖ The U.S. General Accounting Office predicts that employment would increase by 52% among poor mothers and 33% among near-poor mothers if they received complete support for child care.

Family Support [No data]

- ❖ Only ^{24.3}~~20~~% of all eligible three- and four-year olds can participate in Head Start and Oregon Pre-Kindergarten, due to limited resources.

State Department of Education

~~delete~~ ❖ For every child served by Community Action's Head Start program, two are on waiting lists.

* Only one third of families living on low incomes receive welfare.

Health Care [No data]

- ❖ Nearly one in seven Washington County residents has no form of health insurance.
- ❖ The number of primary and preventive health care providers serving low-income families is four times less than what is adequate, and nearly eight times less than the county average.

❖ Only three dentists can be identified as serving the needs of the poorest 20% of Washington County residents. (The Federal Government has declared Wash. Co. to be a "Dental Health Professional Shortage area")

← Oregon Health Division

- ❖ Half of homeless shelter respondents [sic] stated a need for mental health services.
- ❖ For every chronically mental-ill poor person receiving treatment, one waits on a list.

Drug and Alcohol Addiction [No data]

- ❖ Intensive outpatient treatment programs for drug and alcohol addiction cost \$1,500 or more. Inpatient programs cost much more.

- ❖ Only one in fifteen low-income individuals can get into residential treatment for drug and alcohol addiction immediately.

Food and Hunger [No data]

- ❖ Only 5% of Washington County residents receive Food Stamps. Statewide, the figure is closer to one in 10%.
- ❖ Less than half of eligible children participate in the Supplementary Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) *due to lack of resources.*

Legal Aid [No data]

- ❖ Only one out of every five low-income individuals who need ^{civil} legal assistance receives it; *only 1 out of 25 receive actual representation.*

Welfare Assistance [No data]

- ❖ A family of three receiving welfare and food stamps receives only 73% of the income needed for a basic standard of existence.

- ❖ A recipient of General Assistance in Oregon receives only 29% of the income needed for a basic standard of existence.

Domestic Violence [No data]

- ❖ For every woman or child who receives shelter from violence, eight who request it are turned away.

*For every woman or child who receives shelter from violence, eight who request it are turned away.
[No data]*

Transportation

- ❖ The need for dependable, affordable transportation ranks high among the factors that, though difficult to quantify, have disproportionate importance to people with low incomes. The special significance of transportation, either public or private, is that it represents access to employment, education, medical care, family support services, and a host of other needs and activities.

The Future

The purpose of this Community Action Organization report has been to shed

and connecting families with other services needed.

living on a

While the goal of erasing poverty in Washington County is ambitious, the community has many resources at its command, and has already seized some of the opportunities to invest in the human potential otherwise so easily lost to poverty.

light on the many complex and troublesome problems associated with low income, in the belief that new Community understanding of poverty's multiple facets will lead to new community attitudes, and ~~thus~~ ultimately to the development of new community responses to ^{poverty} ~~the predicament of its low income population.~~

While the goal of erasing poverty in Washington County is ambitious, the community has many resources at its command, and has already seized some of the opportunities to invest in the human potential otherwise so easily lost to poverty.

An example of the kind of investment the community has already made is the *Steps to Success* program. *Steps to Success* trains low-income people in both life skills and employment-related skills, and provides other support services to help families hold the pieces of their lives together while they are taking the necessary steps toward improving their economic condition. Similarly, the *Head Start* program provides immediate support for poor families, helping their children

keep pace with the children of less economically burdened families in the community.

The local high-tech industry has also recognized the need for more investment in the low-income community. The Semiconductor Workforce Assessment outlined recommendations for the computer industry that support the needs both of industry and of the community as a whole:

(It is recommended that industry...)
"Allow for part-time work paired with training. Investigate options for scholarships, tuition reimbursements, child care assistance and transportation assistance. Ensure that individuals who receive welfare or unemployment support can continue to receive this support while they are enrolled in job training programs until they are hired."

Poverty to Prosperity

Victor and Sheila's story, told earlier, is the story of a Washington County family that just two years ago lived in poverty. Today, thanks to

What made the difference

investments that their community has made in programs like those described, theirs is the story of a family that has moved out of poverty. Victor has a new job, one that pays a living wage, enough to support his family. He receives training and education, and his employer pays for all of it. His family has new stability, and Victor's opportunities continue to grow. Victor's job contributes toward his pension, and even more important, pays for health insurance. "We're doing fine," says Sheila. "We don't worry about doctor's bills, we get the medications we need. It's a lot better."

with successful conclusions

There are many stories[↑] like Victor and Sheila's still waiting to be told, about successes in the community's battle against poverty. The key will be for Washington County to include the fulfillment of the potential of every one of its residents in its definition of community success. The county's wealth of community resources — a caring public, strong social service partnerships, committed businesses, and overall community good

will — can change the faces of thousands of Washington County residents from faces of poverty to faces of prosperity.

JUST DO IT

This little joke created quite a stir Jim!

END OF EXECUTIVE REPORT

The key will be for Washington County to include fulfillment of the potential of every resident in its definition of community success.