

Homeless programs under pressure

A sluggish economy affects services as the county gets an influx of families needing help

By **DANA TIMS**
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HILLSBORO — An influx of homeless families to Washington County, from elsewhere in the Portland area and from as far away as North Dakota and Illinois, is gobbling up available shelter space and straining a system that administrators say is already overloaded.

Causes behind the migration aren't clear, but officials say it could be linked to Oregon's decision — unlike many of its counterparts — not to cap the amount of assistance available through social service programs.

"We don't know if that is the driving factor," said Annette Evans, Washington County's homeless program coordinator. "But we are definitely looking into it."

The influx is noted in a new report that Evans submitted Tuesday to the county's Board of Commissioners. The report summarizes third-year findings and statistics in the county's 10-year plan to end homelessness.

The plan is part of a statewide effort adopted in 2008.

Much of Evans' presentation focused on her view of the need for public and private entities to

combine scarce resources in the larger effort to find shelter for homeless families and individuals.

A sagging larger economy continues to create new demands on the social service system, she said, even as the money available to combat homelessness continues to dwindle.

Some measurable gains are apparent in the new report, which draws in part from an effort in January to physically tabulate the county's homeless population.

The 1,356 persons identified as homeless during the week-long count, for instance, are down from the 1,386 counted in January 2010, Evans said.

"It was still a bad year last year," she told board members. "But we see that decrease as an indicator of success in shifting our resources to where they matter most."

The "point-in-time" figure is only one way of gauging homelessness in the county, she said.

Another section of the report, for instance, notes there were 2,383 homeless children in Washington County's schools during the 2010-11 school year. Of those, 1,584 attended school in Beaverton, giving that district the largest homeless-student population in the state.

Evans also broke down the rising numbers of homeless families seeking temporary shelter in the county.

The 17 unreferred families seeking help in January jumped to 99 families in August.

Just under half of those families were from Washington County, Evans said. About two-thirds of the remaining families came to Washington County from elsewhere in the metro area, with Multnomah County being predominant.

Nearly one in five of all those seeking shelter, however, came from out of state, she said. States of origin listed by those seeking help included Washington, California, Nevada, North Dakota, Minnesota and Illinois.

Evans noted that those states, unlike Oregon, have moved to cap the amount of assistance available under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program.

Board Chairman Andy Duyck, noting that job-rich Washington County is getting an across-the-board influx of new residents, wondered whether those numbers would make it impossible for the county to ever completely eliminate homelessness.

"Yes," Evans said. "That's probably true."

In an interview later, she added, "The goal now is to develop systems that really function well together. That's where we will be channeling our efforts are we move ahead."

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