

Portland

TODAY'S
PORTLAND
FREEBIE

Bike Blast

Bike checkups and safety tips, discount bike helmets, refreshments and entertainment will be offered during an Earth Day event from 4 to 8 p.m. today at Kaiser Permanente's Interstate South Medical Office, 3500 N. Interstate Ave. Information: 503-813-4820.

Pilot program for homelessness declared success

The \$900,000 effort keeps at-risk residents off the streets, the City Council will hear Wednesday

By HENRY STERN
THE OREGONIAN

A pilot program to get Portland's homeless into housing or keep residents from losing shelter proved successful in its first two years, according to an independent analysis that City Council will hear Wednesday.

The report concludes that the \$900,000 program helped more people than projected and assisted an unusually diverse clientele that included teenage parents, adults with HIV/AIDS and illegal substance abusers.

The Transition to Housing project contracted with 13 agencies to cover their clients' short-term

housing expenses instead of long-term or permanent housing assistance. Short-term costs include moving expenses, first month and last month's rent and security deposits.

Participants were required to have gross incomes below 20 percent of area median income, which some agencies said was too low.

The program continues this year with \$600,000 in city money, but like many initiatives, it faces financial questions in a weak economy, said Heather Lyons, manager of homeless program for the Bureau of Housing and Community Development.

"As times get tougher, it becomes a tougher question," Lyons said Monday. "This is something we hope council will invest resources in."

Marshall Runkel, an aide to Commissioner Erik Sten, called the program a harbinger of homeless

initiatives that are more cost-effective than inaction or traditional homeless programs.

Sten, who oversees the housing and community development bureau, has been assigned by Mayor Vera Katz to head a panel updating Portland's 15-year-old homeless plan.

Runkel said the program's per-day expenses fall well below comparable costs that arise in larger shelters or letting participants' problems worsen until they must be hospitalized or jailed.

The report found the program's average amount of rental assistance from January 2001 through December 2002 totaled \$1,284.85 per participant. The average length of assistance was 4.3 months.

Six-month follow-ups showed 74.2 percent with permanent housing and 13.3 percent with promising prospects for permanent housing. Follow-up numbers

at the 12-month mark showed 62 percent in permanent housing and 9.3 percent with promising prospects.

A total of 771 participants got help over the two-year period, about 19 percent higher than original projections.

"I was surprised at how strong the outcome was," said report author Thomas Moore, of Herbert & Louis LLC. "It was an eye-opener."

Herbert & Louis, a Wilsonville firm that does research, program evaluation and consulting, got \$50,000 from the city for its evaluation and 60-page report.

The report could not quantify what share of the program's beneficiaries would have ended up homeless without the pilot project.

But the study concluded that interviews with staff and participants "strongly suggests that the majority of participants would have had no alternative and would

have found themselves homeless without the assistance of the project."

The study credited in part the project's approach of letting recipient agencies decide how best to target the money, even allowing for payment of back rents for those on the verge of homelessness.

Liora Berry, housing services and development manager for the Cascade AIDS Project, also praised the program's flexibility. The Cascade AIDS Project served twice as many people as anticipated.

The recommended continuation of the program came with comments from social service agencies that the data collection and reporting were burdensome. They also wanted a higher requirement for recipients than 20 percent of median income, a point echoed by Berry.

The study comes a year after a City Club of Portland report criti-

cized the local state of affordable housing. The report found housing costs in Portland rising more than twice as fast as average household income since 1970.

The City Club report found 17 percent of households and 38 percent of renter households could afford adequate housing. The report estimated that housing assistance, mostly paid from federal money, met about one-third of the need.

"Most low-income households manage to find housing in some way such as sharing housing with families or friends, sleeping in basements, attics or vehicles or simply paying half or more of their income for rent," the City Club report said. "Therefore despite their large numbers, the plight of inadequately housed families is invisible to the average citizen."

Henry Stern: 503-294-5988;
henrystern@news.oregonian.com

- Copy for Renee & Becky
- Return JN