

Challenging People to Shape a Better Future Now

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It Does Good Things.



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Meaningful Response to a Daunting Challenge

By Victor Merced, director of Housing and Community Services.

When you encounter them panhandling on the street, crouching in doorways, sleeping under bridges, you may want to help. But you don't know quite how. The answer is hard.

Homeless persons populate our world, and they likely need help. That's why many organizations are addressing this challenge. Ours is one.

Oregon Housing and Community Services works on two fronts. First, OHCS finances housing for the homeless, and not just housing, but our agency is piloting permanent, supportive housing. This means that services will be attached to the housing so that homeless persons and families receive the help they need to break the cycle. This is an approach that has proved effective in Portland.

Second, OHCS collects data from cities and counties, analyzes the numbers and puts them into meaningful perspective. More than 13,000 Oregonians—the majority experiencing mental illness and struggling with addiction—live on the streets, live in their cars and live in shelters. In Multnomah County, the number is around 3,600. Minorities make up almost 50 percent of the Portland number or a total of nearly 1,800.

You might know some of these folks. Maybe, they're even family members. Hurts to think about it, I know. Enough Oregonians to fill a small city—the size of The Dalles—do not have a place to live. And it happens in rural towns like The Dalles, not just in urban areas such as Portland. Many homeless families just live out in Oregon's forests—often in tents.

Homelessness is a national problem, exacerbated by social service systems strained to the breaking point. In our state, the budget reductions that followed the recession of 2001 had devastating impacts. The systems serving people at risk of homelessness, particularly those with mental illness and substance abuse, suffered deep cuts.

Understanding the Problem

Each year in Oregon, local agencies serving the homeless conduct a count of people experiencing homelessness on one night in January. Unlike the "street count" conducted in Portland, the statewide count to which I have been referring primarily captures the number of people seeking shelter services on a given night. While this count under-represents the scope of the tragedy, it does provide a valuable perspective on homelessness and details about the people it affects.

We have learned, for example, that single Oregonians represent 39 percent of those experiencing

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The Skanner's Weekly Poll

Celebrities often use their popularity to influence an election. What effect has Oprah had on your opinion of Barack Obama? Because of Oprah's endorsement:

1) I've decided to vote for him.

2) I would have voted for him anyway.

3) I'm sticking with a different candidate.

4) I'm voting for someone else BECAUSE Oprah endorsed him.

[See Results](#)

homelessness, while persons in families make up the remaining 61 percent. Think of this: Almost two-thirds of homeless Oregonians are members of families. The typical homeless family includes a mother with two children younger than 5 years of age.

Other statewide findings of note:

Single women comprised 10 percent of the homeless population.

Youth up to age 18 represented 32 percent of the homeless counted on that January night.

Minorities made up a greater proportion of homeless persons than those who are White. African Americans, for example, represented only 1.8 percent of the Oregon population but 7.4 percent of the homeless population.

Extreme poverty and homelessness go hand in hand. Among the causes of homelessness: insufficient income and low-paying jobs, unaffordable housing and poor access to services.

But homelessness is disproportionately associated with mental illness and substance abuse. In fact, among the people counted in January 2007, nearly one-quarter reported a problem with substance abuse, almost 20 percent suffered from a mental health problem, and another 9 percent struggled with both mental illness and addiction.

Crafting a response

Our state—indeed, our nation—must act in order to stop the suffering of our homeless neighbors. It's starting to happen.

In April 2006, Gov. Ted Kulongoski issued an executive order creating an Ending Homelessness Advisory Council. During monthly meetings, EHAC has worked to understand the nature of homelessness across Oregon and to craft goals and strategies to end this tragedy for our citizens. EHAC is working with the governor and his staff on strategies for ending homelessness.

In the meantime, the Oregon Legislature has acted, approving \$16.4 million for Oregon Housing and Community Services to finance 150 units of supportive housing for the chronically homeless this biennium. The program is called Housing PLUS, and OHCS is establishing partnerships with other state agencies to put the pieces together.

Housing PLUS is based on a successful model, demonstrated to be cost-effective in Portland, that puts homeless persons into housing that is directly linked to social services. Of course, this is a beginning. But a good beginning. With 13,000 homeless Oregonians, we will need a lot of good beginnings—and good endings.

Reach us at www.ohcs.oregon.gov or 503-986-2000. Learn more about the Ending Homelessness Advisory Council and Oregon's planning to end homelessness at www.ehac.oregon.gov/

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