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Faith groups pledge aid for county's homeless shelters

[Nancy Townsley](#) - 05/17/06

Together, they provide beds for 110 people for as long as six weeks at a time. Countywide, officials said, 1,155 individuals — including 400 children — are homeless at any one time.

Those who don't make it into shelters often live in unheated garages, cars, and backyard sheds. Single men sometimes retreat to forested areas to avoid detection.

Saturday's meeting helped to galvanize efforts by a couple dozen folks to campaign for a new safety levy in November that would fund police agencies and social services.

"We're asking people connected to our county's churches to pass out brochures and get the word out," said Sydney Sherwood, director of the Good Neighbor Center in Tigard.

"It's called 'educate and advocate.' If we don't get the levy passed, we'll all be out begging in the community," she added.

Levy funds would help support the shelters and subsidize a number of other county-run programs, from jail operations to the war on methamphetamine abuse.

The shelters are busy banging a very loud drum and hoping the community will hear it.

"The average age of a homeless person is 12," Sherwood told the Pacific audience.

There are virtually no shelter services for single individuals, and nine out of 10 people



photo by Chase Allgood

who knock on the door are turned away due to lack of space.

Still, the shelters serve a critical need in the county, said Pat Rogers, who directs the Community Action shelter.

"We believe that the answer to homelessness lies in affordable housing," he said. "But there's no doubt that the shelters are an important piece to the stabilization process.

"Without them, there is no front door."

Hard choices

As many as 45,000 of the 500,000 people living in Oregon's wealthiest county cannot afford housing here, said Russ Dondero, a retired Pacific professor and longtime shelter advocate.

Finances force them to choose between paying their rent and buying food.

That was the case for Dora Mioduski, a native of Mexico who spoke about her experience with homelessness.

"My father came to the United States to find a better life for his family," said Mioduski. "But I didn't encounter homelessness until I arrived in Oregon."

Her husband left her in 2000, and without marketable job skills or employment prospects, Mioduski was "very, very afraid."

She found her way to Monika's House, a county shelter. "The people there are always comforting the hurting and the fearful and the embarrassed," she said.

Mioduski took a number of other women and children under her wing at Monika's House and eventually landed a job at the front desk of the county's Department of Housing Services.

Her story echoed a theme that rang true for most of the speakers: no one ever expects to be homeless.

"Homelessness creeps up on people," Dondero said. "For some families it's as close as a catastrophic health crisis or sudden unemployment."

\$90,000 needed

When the safety levy runs out in six weeks, money from the county will dry up — at least until voters have a crack at approving a new levy in November.

Since 2001, the levy has provided about half the funding necessary to operate the shelters.

But directors estimate the shelters' budgets will be shy approximately \$90,000 between July 1 and Dec. 31.

"We need to strategize how to make that money up," noted Dondero, calling that effort "stop-gap funding."

Beyond that, forum attendees indicated a willingness to keep talking about the issue until the county opens up more housing for thousands of low-income residents.

Other speakers at the two-hour event included Peter Korchnak, director of Monika's House, and Chuck Currie, a recently ordained minister and a nationally recognized speaker on homelessness issues.

Waiting lists grow

Three of the county's shelters opened in the 1970s, "back when homelessness had a different face," said Rogers, whose shelter has 20 beds.

As the population increased, he said, "so did incidences of domestic violence." Monika's House opened its doors in 1999.

Waiting lists for shelter beds got longer and longer, Rogers added, prompting directors to create a centralized system for referrals.

Those needing shelter call 503-222-5555 and get on a list for placement at the first available center. It often takes four weeks or more to rise to the top.

It isn't a perfect — or even adequate — system, directors agreed.

"Our goal is always to get people from homelessness to housing," Rogers said.

Moore insisted the shelters' plight represents a "crucial public safety issue" because they often care for people with drug addictions and legal problems.

They receive counseling and find out about job leads. They're offered parenting classes

and chances to learn basic skills like keeping an organized calendar and shopping for the best grocery values.

"We work with every family so they can deal with whatever they're facing," Moore said. "Our centers are not asylums for people who are trying to escape their realities."

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