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North Coast sees rise in homeless students

Local families continue to struggle even as the statewide homeless population levels off

By KARA HANSEN
The Daily Astorian

Seaside High School teacher David Lehigh began feeding students with one loaf of bread each month, and the occasional jars of peanut butter and jelly. "Kids can't be creative if they're hungry," says Lehigh, who teaches art.

Five years later, students eat their way through a monthly 50 loaves, 3 to 4 gallons of peanut butter and 8 or 9 quarts of strawberry jam, some packing sandwiches into backpacks to take with them after class.

It's difficult to gauge whether they haven't had enough to eat at home or they're simply hungry, growing teenagers. But Lehigh figured in Seaside - home to one of the state's most transient, high-poverty student populations - ensuring students have some food couldn't hurt.

More Clatsop County students were homeless at some point in the 2007-08 school year, according to a state report released Wednesday.

Astoria's homeless population ballooned from 38 homeless students in 2006-07 to 70 in 2007-08. Knappa's total doubled, from six homeless children to 12 last year. Seaside's grew from 67 students to 85 last year. Warrenton's skyrocketed from 11 students in 2006-07 to 63 in 2007-08.

Local families continued to struggle even as the statewide homeless population leveled off. The number of homeless students in Oregon grew by just 2 percent, from 15,517 students in 2006-07 to 15,859 in 2007-08, representing 3 percent of the state's students in kindergarten through 12th grade.

That included 11,112 who shared housing with relatives or friends because of economic hardship such as foreclosure or job loss, 1,957 living in cars, on the streets or in substandard housing, 1,820 in emergency shelters and 970 whose primary residence was a motel. Another 2,802 students were unaccompanied minors, abandoned by parents, foster care children or runaways.

"Homeless students face huge challenges before they even get to the classroom door," Oregon Schools Superintendent Susan Castillo said. "Schools have an important part to play in helping these students, along with many other public and private organizations."

Homeless students

From the Oregon Department of Education

Clatsop County homeless students during the 2007-08 school year, by district:

Astoria, 70; Jewell, 0; Knappa, 12; Seaside, 85; Warrenton-Hammond, 63.

Federal law requires schools to designate "homeless liaisons" who coordinate services and outreach for homeless students and conduct annual head counts.

Of Astoria's homeless students, a majority lived in temporary shelters or had doubled up in housing last year. Astoria School District Superintendent Craig Hoppes attributed much of the increase to the December storms.

"The storms last year made some people homeless," he said. "We had kids who had to move from here to Warrenton or from here to Seaside because of house damage, or they were displaced from one house to another in Astoria." To offer stability, schools foot the bill for transportation to keep those students in their home districts, Hoppes said.

Lee Loving, assistant principal at Seaside High and the primary contact for homeless students, had other theories for the local homeless population's growth spurt.

"One is the current economic downturn: parent or guardian job loss, foreclosures on homes, rented homes being turned into condos - that's still happening, amazingly enough," he said.

The biggest part of the increase there was at the high school. Seaside High counted 14 homeless students in 2006-07. Last year there were 28. Thirteen of them didn't live with their parents, compared to two in that situation the year before.

"I was surprised to see how many unaccompanied youth we had at the high school," Loving said. "Some of those were from families who moved out of the area because of job loss or home loss, and the student stayed with another family or with older young adults."

The district offers a variety of services to support those students: getting them bus passes, waiving school fees, providing supplies and setting them up with free breakfast and lunch.

"Our counselors do a nice job of wrapping services around those kids, linking them to other agencies in the community and getting them services they need to graduate," Loving said. "That's the most important thing for us, that they're safe and we get them a diploma."

Lehigh doesn't question why students take free sandwiches. But as Seaside's homeless population has grown, he has noticed more taking extra after school, and more dropping by for breakfast before classes start. And it's no longer only students from his classes.

"It's tough on the coast," he said. "It's tough for families to make it, even when they have both parents at home.

"It goes hand in hand with the types of employment in the area, which are often related to tourism. ... That's carried over to the kids."