

County social services seek safety net

*By Nan Nelson
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When an invitation was sent out to see how service providers and funders could work together to assist an ever-increasing population of children and families in need, most of the invited agencies showed up.

It was a strong showing of community in Tillamook County. And that, as everyone in attendance would have likely agreed, is exactly what's needed at this point in the region's economic history.

Facilitated by Mike Cook of the Neahcasa Emergency Housing Program and sponsored by Fulcrum Community Resources, the meeting convened when Cook said he was witnessing a 100 percent increase in requests for service of the Emergency Housing Program for the school district.

That made him wonder how other social service agencies were faring, and if these groups couldn't combine their efforts to help those in need.

Over 30 people representing 15 countywide agencies met March 3, to share with each other how the recent economic downturn is impacting their ability to provide services.

Most of the agencies reported an increase in the number of people requesting services. John Sandusky of Community Action Resource Enterprises, Inc. (CARE) reported a 20 to 30 percent increase in requests for services. "There are more people in need," he said. CARE provides emergency and homeless services, and runs the Healthy Start program which is a child abuse prevention program.

The crash of the recycling market has left Cart'm Recycling Center scrambling for dollars. Director Jan Hamilton told the group that both donations and the number of people using the transfer and recycling center have dropped. Hamilton said Cart'm is looking for ways to utilize the resale store to help families in need.

Toni Steffans, who operates the Clothing Bank in Wheeler, said she is "loaded with clothes." Anyone who comes to the North County Food Bank to get food is eligible to fill a black garbage bag with clothing for their family.

Steffans said she gets great support from the Hope Chest Thrift Store and Cart'm. "When I need help, I don't have to go very far to get it," she said.

County unemployment jumps

While Tillamook County may lag somewhat behind the national economic picture, its effects are beginning to be felt locally.

According to Dave Landstrom, Office Supervisor for Worksource Oregon in Tillamook, there has been an increase in the numbers of people visiting the unemployment office.

"The lobby is busier," he said. "We still have a fairly decent number of jobs, in the high 40s to 50s, which is touch under average. But there are not as many entry level jobs."

Landstrom said jobs were really down in December and January. A year ago, he noted, it was a job-seekers market; now it's an employers market. "Employers can be choosy because there are more applicants per job, it's more competitive," said Landstrom.

In December of 2008, the Tillamook County unemployment rate was 7.8 percent. By Jan. 2009, it had increased by two points, to 9.6 percent. Landstrom said it was one of the highest jumps he has seen.

The Oregon statewide unemployment rate, which was at 8.3 percent in December 2008, jumped to 9.9 percent in January 2009. The national rate for the same month was 7.6 percent.

The Clothing Bank provides donations to the schools, Rinehart Clinic, the Nehalem Valley Care Center and those who get flooded out.

"They have a place they can go to for pots and pans and bedding," said Steffens. Clothing Bank volunteer Louise Christensen said she has seen a lot more people coming in now than a year ago. The North County Food Bank gives food to people with true emergencies or who qualify for supplemental food under U.S. Dept. of Agriculture guidelines. Food bank representative Richard Jones said the agency has experienced an average five percent increase over the past four years. The biggest difference, he noted, is the 11 percent increase in families who have never accessed the food bank before. "These are brand new people," he said. "It's not more people, it's a mix of people that is different."

Regional food bank coordinator Cari Clifton said in Jan. 2008, 593 emergency boxes were distributed. In Jan. of 2009, the number had increased to 992.

Family Resource Coordinators for the Neah-Kah-Nie School District identify families in need and find resources to hook them up to. Terry Houchins, who works at Garibaldi Grade School said, "The problem now is where to go. There is an increased demand and its continuing to rise. Families are struggling with bills, housing and utilities."

Habitat for Humanity expects donations to be down around 40 percent this year, and are only building one new house this year. The agency is considering looking at rehabilitation projects.

Those who operate The Hope Chest in Nehalem said they have seen a slight drop in donations, but are still able to funnel \$7,000 to \$8,000 per month to various agencies.

Julie Maple, who manages affordable housing for the Northwest Oregon Housing Authority, said her agency deals with long-term, sustained housing. She currently has two units for a senior or person with a disability that have been vacant for the past several months. In her program, she said, "If you want housing you have to pay for it." In Nehalem at Ekahni Court, Maple said, all the units are currently filled, but there are only a few names on the waiting list.

Erin Skaar of the Women's Resource Center, formerly known as the Women's Crisis Center, reported that the area's first-ever domestic violence shelter is up and running, with the ability to house up to five victims and their families for 30 to 90 days. "We haven't seen a huge increase, but women come to us with fewer resources themselves," she said.

The Rinehart Clinic in Wheeler is a primary care clinic which provides quality care regardless of the ability to pay, said Executive Director Ellen Boggs. Patients requesting to be on a sliding-scale fee program have increased from 25 percent of the total number of people seen to 37 percent this year. Many of the clinic's services are free or available at a significantly reduced cost, she said.

Representatives from the Schmuck Foundation reported their annual golf tournament fundraiser is sold out for this year, but said they won't know until May how they are doing financially. "There are a lot more donations that come in besides the golf tournament," said Lori Orton.

Sundusky captured the feeling of many of the agency personnel, when he said, "The hardest thing to do is say no." He explained that CARE develops a monthly budget which doesn't reset until the next month.

"Many times the money runs out before the end of the month," he said. "We can help, help, help, until we can't. There is a large unmet need as well."