

afford a place to stay."

Gil Shaw at St. Vincent De Paul in Eugene also blames rising unemployment and a bad economy for an increase in the homeless in Lane County.

"The poor are not poor by choice," he says. "Granted, a small segment of society on welfare are always going to be on welfare. But most people want to work and be self-supporting. The people we see coming into the system and requesting assistance now were middle-class two or three years ago."

For poor families who cannot get into either of the two family shelters, another option is to go to the Benevolent Faith Mission in Eugene. The Mission houses more than 100 people a day. But families are sometimes reluctant to go there because it requires that they sleep separately in segregated dorms. Catholic Community Services also provides support for the homeless, and organizations such as St. Vincent de Paul help pay for medications, rent and other items while people are getting back on their feet.

"Our annual report for last year showed that we visited 5,000 homes and saw 28,000 people last year," Shaw says. "We also spent about \$6,000 helping fulfill prescriptions. When people are trying to keep a roof over their head, they cut out a lot of other things like medication that can have a bad effect on their health."

The stress of being homeless also can be acute for many people.

"Being homeless is very stressful for many people," O'Connor says. "But they handle it with great dignity. People seem willing to do what they need to do in order to change the situation."

Teresa Taylor, the program director at Family Shelter House, agrees.

"I've really been struck by the strength people show," she says. "Particularly mothers. They don't have the luxury of despair, and even if their situation is desperate, they don't give up because of their children. If getting help means going to six different appointments with six different social workers, then that is what they do."

Fathers of homeless families also feel at a loss initially since they are no longer the breadwinners, Taylor says.

"Many men become depressed when they can't find jobs, and they and

their family have to go on welfare," she says. "Their whole purpose in life has been ripped out from under their feet, and usually it takes them time to adjust to this transition."

Taylor says that she was pleasantly surprised by the flexibility children show in homeless situations.

"I thought at first that seeing homeless children would be depressing," she says. "But they are incredibly adaptable — especially the younger ones. As long as they're fed and have a place to sleep and their mommy and daddy, they manage just fine. Most have a beautiful trust in their parents, and because they don't understand the intricacies of the situation, they can be satisfied and happy with the basics. I think it's important that people realize that children won't be scarred for life just because the parents lose their

home or have to ask for public assistance."

In addition to offering assistance to families, Family Shelter House provides space for people suffering from mental handicaps and physical disabilities that also fall into the homeless category.

Like the handicapped, the mentally ill also may find themselves homeless with no place to go. The Hawthorn Program is an organization affiliated with Eugene Emergency Housing that specializes in providing services for the mentally ill in the area.

"Basically, we provide housing for people who are low income and have major psychological disorders," says Dan Willis, a resident advocate at Hawthorn. "We provide case management services and also help people fill

out welfare forms or find jobs. Our intent is to help people open up and be supportive of each other in a positive environment."

Hawthorn residents stay in an apartment complex of 35 units with two full-time and three part-time staff members to assist them. Each unit has a separate kitchen, bedroom, bathroom and living room, and this arrangement encourages people to take care of themselves, Willis says. This feature differs from halfway houses where residents live more communally, he says.

"Living here functions as an in-between step for many of our residents so that they are more able to cope with the real world if they leave," Willis says.

Unlike some of the other shelters, Hawthorn imposes no time limit on its



Photo by Tim Jones

Keeping The Family Together

Who are the homeless?

Traditionally, the question conjurs up images of the happy-go-lucky hobo, or pious monk or mystic. But in these tough economic times, more and more people are finding it hard to stay financially afloat. How did these men and women get in this situation? How do they and their families cope?

"We lost our housing because of a personality difference," says Russel Strong, who currently is residing at the Brethren Shelter in Springfield. "We were voted out of the house we shared with three other tenants and had to move out. I didn't want to see my babies out on the street so I called the family crisis unit, and they provided a place for us in two hours."

Strong and his wife have five children between the ages of six months and 16. His wife is a full-time homemaker, and he

is a construction worker. But his employment is very seasonal, Strong says.

"We have about six days to stay in the shelter, and hopefully we'll be able to find a place by then," he says. "It's very stressful looking for a four-bedroom house for \$400 a month. A lot of people are afraid to rent to us when they hear the number and age of our kids."

Strong also says adjusting to life in the shelter has posed difficulties for his family.

"The children are fussy and cry a lot," he says. "Especially our 19-month old and 3-year-old daughter. The older ones are used to traveling with their grandparents. But the younger ones aren't. It makes it hard on my wife and I to see them upset this way."

Strong does not regret going to the shelter, however.

"If people find themselves

in a homeless situation, they should immediately call the family crisis unit," he says. "They are very prompt and really extend their hand out to make people feel comfortable."

Strong also believes community involvement and donations are helpful to the homeless and greatly appreciated.

"Food donations are important," he says. "When people have no money, they can't buy food for their children. Some shelters only help with a place to sleep. But it helps a lot if food is provided for families like us, too."

Linda Huntley and her husband found themselves homeless when the apartment complex they were remodeling was sold and the new owners decided not to employ them.

"We had 30 days notice,"

she says. "But jobs are hard to find."

To make matters worse, many of their possessions were stolen while they were out job hunting.

"We came home and found that someone had ripped us off," Huntley says. "I had everything boxed up, ready to move and they just took it — dishes, a crib, Christmas presents, everything!"

The Huntleys did not go immediately to a shelter facility, but stayed in motels until their resources ran out.

"A lot of people don't realize they're heading for trouble," Huntley says. "If we had found a place to rent within five days, we would have been all right. But when we didn't, we should have gone to the shelter when we still had our money together."

Huntley says her husband wanted to, but she resisted the idea.

"I thought as long as we had money, we shouldn't go to the shelter," she says. "I realize now that my husband was probably right. We should have asked for help sooner."

The Huntleys both are looking for jobs and taking advantage of the two-parent program with family services that assists homeless individuals in their search for work.

"We're looking for anything right now," she says. "We're around each other all the time, and both the kids and us are getting irritable. But we're putting in applications and hope to find a new place soon. My husband may go back to school, too, if he can't find a job."

— MARY COURTIS