NEWSBRIEFS

Audit: Oregonians with serious mental illnesses left untreated

Oregon's mental health care needs are not being met, an independent audit of the Department of Human Services has found. According to the report, about 15,500 Oregonians with serious mental illnesses do not have insurance coverage or mental health services from the state. Many of the unserved are seniors, individuals with physical or mental disabilities, and members of minority groups.

The auditors also note that in recent years, the criminal justice system has become one of the largest providers of mental health services in the state. According to the Department of Corrections, 41 percent of inmates have a mental health diagnosis.

The report's recommendations include increasing the availablity and funding for community-based mental health programs, emphasizing early prevention strategies, and expanding diversion programs so that individuals with mental illness stay out of the prison system. Providing services to people who aren't currently cared for would require an additional $290 million a year, the auditors determined.

Oregon has been spending about $447 million a year of local and federal money on mental health services, but proposed budget cuts for the next two years would strip substance abuse treatment and community-based mental health programs of much of their funding.

Poverty line inches up for 2009, qualifying more families for help

On Jan. 23, the U.S. government raised the federal poverty line, which will qualify more Oregonians for public assistance. In 2008, a family of three with less than $17,600 in annual income qualified as poor by federal standards. For 2009, the same-sized family making less than $18,310 is considered poor.

Oregon bases eligibility for some public assistance programs on federal poverty guidelines. With the increase, more families will qualify for food stamps, reduced-price school lunches, child care subsidies and health care.

But not everyone newly eligible for assistance will necessarily receive it, according to the Oregon Center for Public Policy. Currently, the Employment Related Day Care program is available to any family with an income under 185 percent of the poverty line, or $33,874 for a three-person family under the new guidelines. With Governor Ted Kulongoski's budget cuts, the subsidy would be restricted to people who found new jobs after receiving cash assistance from the state.

Social-activist groups claim illegal targeting by police

Civil liberties activists in Tacoma, Wash. say local police are targeting them for surveillance, collecting information on their events and activities, and using what they find in ways that may impinge on the groups' right to peaceably assemble.

According to Timothy Smith of the Bill of Rights Defense Committee, a monthly Homeland Security report lists events and activities where Tacoma police collected information on social-activist groups. Documents also reveal that information has been shared between the police, federal authorities and a private company that owns a local detention facility, Smith said.

About 40 organizations have been monitored, Smith said, including the Tacoma branch of the ACLU and an immigrant aid group that sometimes visits the detention facility.

Leaner resource access center has support, less money

BY MARA GRUNBAUM
STAFF WRITER

Though they don't know yet where the money to operate it will come from, city council voted on Jan. 28 to push forward with construction of the long-awaited Resource Access Center, which will provide low-income housing, shelter beds and social services to over 1,000 people.

The center was originally slated to open this year, but a land use appeal held back most of the project's construction money until a resolution was reached on Jan. 30. Now the Housing Authority of Portland, in charge of developing the center, says it can start digging in September and open the doors by April 2011.

"This day has been a long time coming," said Housing Commissioner Nick Fish at the council meeting.

Another financial hiccup – the devaluation of low-income housing tax credits in the economic collapse – spurred the city to shave $3 million off the construction budget by amending the plans for the center.

The original design called for a full-block, five-story building with a 90-bed men's shelter, 152 units of permanent supportive housing and a resource center serving 1,000 people a day.

In the redesign, the building's footprint shrinks to a half-block along Northwest Broadway, between Irving and Hoyt. It will stand eight stories tall, but a loss in square footage means the number of permanent supportive housing units will drop to 130.

The shelter and resource center's capacities will not change, said Michael Andrews, the HAP developer on the project.

"The function remains there," Andrews said. "It's a tighter building. It's a better building for the block."

Doreen Binder of Transition Projects, Inc., which will run the shelter and resource center, told the council she was initially skeptical about the redesign, but she feels the new plan fits the center's needs. "I think the current incarnation of this plan is beautiful," Binder said. "It has been a lifelong dream to get this building done."

With a unanimous vote, city council authorized the plan and committed to help secure the $920,000 to $1.2 million yearly support necessary to operate the center once it is complete.

Though money is tight now, Andrews is confident that the Resource Access Center won't be "another Wapato" – the $58-million county jail built in 2004 that sits unused for lack of funding.

"We have contingency plans to cover the operating costs" if private grants and foundation money don't come through, Fish said. "The city has fully commited to operate this building."

The access center, a key component of the city's Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness, has been years in the making.

"It has been on the agenda since I started working here in 1995," Mayor Sam Adams said. "This has never been needed more."

DOCUMENT FEE, from page 1

Director of Neighborhood Partnerships and convener of The Housing Alliance, a statewide coalition of housing advocates. "There will be some additional revenue pushes for affordable housing that will come around the Housing and Community Services Department budget."

Byrd says they will be asking the department for bonding authority backed by future lottery revenues.

"We have very little state resources dedicated to affordable housing," Byrd says. "At this point, we have about $13 million that goes from state revenues straight into affordable housing and ending homelessness."

The document fee would double that, she says, and give local communities more flexibility and stability in planning solutions.

"It is an ongoing, dedicated source of revenue that's going to increase over time. It allows communities to start making longer-term plans, knowing there's money in the pipeline," Byrd says.

The fee would apply to deed and mortgage records in each of the state's counties. The money would be collected by the Housing and Community Services Department and then channeled to fund three primary programs: General Housing, Emergency Housing, and Homeownership Assistance.

"The document recording fee has money for the emergency housing account which is rental assistance, and that is going to be something there's never been enough of, and now we're going to need it more than ever," Anderson said.

Several housing industry groups have opposed other proposals to generate ongoing funds for affordable housing, specifically the real estate transfer fee, which would have tacked on a small percentage to the cost of home sales above a certain price. The document fee, however, has garnered support from homebuilders, bankers and Realtors.

"We recognize that affordable housing helps people – from kids who need stable housing to succeed in school, to seniors who need a place where they feel safe and comfortable," says Linda Navarro, president and CEO of the Oregon Bankers Association. "It gives people the opportunity to live in dignity and independence."

Part of the problem that Oregon is facing in general is that real relief needs to happen at the federal level, says Anderson. "But because that's not going to change in the near future, we need the state of Oregon to step up and get in line with states like Washington to do more to provide affordable housing opportunities. Things like local 10-year plans can't go very far unless the state has more resources."

That's the case for Washington County, which last year created a 10-year plan to end homelessness, based on Portland and Multnomah County's model, but has no funding to effectively back it up. In the meantime, most of Washington County's 1,400-plus homeless population is relying on the shelters provided by a network of churches who open their doors in extreme weather.

On a federal level, housing advocates are calling for gap funding to be included in the Economic Stimulus Plan to cover the losses to the Low Income Housing Tax Credit program. The program, which is the leading single funder for affordable housing, has languished as the market for tax credits has dried up, and projects in the pipeline relying on that funding are unable to move forward.

Rose City Resource

The city's most comprehensive guide to Portland-area social services, organizations and agencies.

Call Eddy Barbosa at Street Roots at 503-228-5657 or write to pdxrosecityresource@hotmail.com

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