

Playing the name game with family homelessness

BY PAUL BODEN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

As we have all seen on our streets and in the media, family homelessness over the past three years is skyrocketing. The recent mortgage crisis has escalated the numbers even more.

In the face of these growing numbers of families losing their homes, of having to split up for survival's sake and even some children ending up in the hellhole of the foster care system, what is our federal government doing? Unbelievably, what they seem intent on doing is enacting Draconian obstacles on a system-wide basis to put in front of families trying desperately to find a roof over their heads.

On April 2, the House (HR 1877) and the Senate (S808) both reintroduced legislation titled Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009. If this bill becomes law, as many people fear, thousands of destitute and poor families will fail to "qualify" for services funded with federal homeless assistance dollars because they will be deemed to be not homeless enough.

Families who have had to double and triple up with other people or who are living in hotels/motels will be forced to show "credible" evidence to authorities to prove that they are indeed, completely, unequivocally, technically homeless.

If asked to leave a doubled or tripled household, their "host" will need to verify that they cannot return. New York City sends inspectors. If people are staying in a motel or SRO hotel room, they are not considered homeless enough until their total household savings are less than 14 days worth of hotel or motel fees. It is only at this point that a family can qualify to get onto the often month-long waiting lists for emergency homeless assistance.

Particularly significant for families and children is that both these bills prohibit HUD homeless counts from requiring



A campsite at a homeless tent city in Sacramento California March 15, 2009. Sacramento's tent city has seen an increase in population as unemployment numbers grow in the US.

communities to include these families. Every two years HUD mandates local communities to count their number of homeless people. If a family has not managed to secure a shelter bed and therefore is living in tenuous doubled-up and motel situations, it quite literally does not count.

The consequences for homeless children and youth in these situations are particularly ominous. In 2006, the Department of Education reported 688,174 homeless children in our schools, and this year that number is expected to rise 15 to 20 percent. The educational and social barriers they face are great. It is a "story" getting lots of air time but little serious consideration by policymakers.

Evidence: These same bills passed the House and the Senate last year with strong Bush White House support but failed to

come out of conference committee. Now they have been reintroduced. If they pass as written and communities are prohibited from including many of these school children in the HUD definition of homelessness, they also will create additional barriers to referrals for services and other critical inter-agency collaboration. So where is the change we all voted for? New president. New congress. Same old bill.

These bills promote a cruel and vicious cycle. Once families lose their homes, they scramble for any place to stay. If they stay in the streets, left with only tents to call home, they risk being categorized as "unfit parents" and losing their children to public agencies. But families will do everything humanly possible not to have that happen. And so they will stay with other people in unstable situations or in motels. Ironically, that decision to keep and protect their

children can then render them ineligible for homeless assistance.

Family homelessness, as with the mortgage crisis today, is deeply rooted in federal government decisions. From 1978 to 2006, the budget authority of the Department of Housing and Urban Development fell from \$83 billion to \$29 billion in 2004 constant dollars. Meanwhile in that same time period, federal expenditures on mortgage interest deductions grew from \$40 billion to \$122 billion. Direct entitlement programs aimed at housing poor people were replaced with a mortgage interest tax deduction program aimed at promoting home ownership. But now that mortgages are collapsing and homes are being foreclosed, families that were homeowners are becoming poor people.

It should have been clear all along that Reaganomics and deregulation since 1983 would have a negative effect for others down the road. Homelessness is the end of that road.

The Bush Doctrine still rules in Washington D.C. Given the narrow and arbitrary definition of homelessness, the bills just introduced in the house and Senate are again designed to exclude many homeless families with children from homeless assistance services.

If they pass, many will be forced into the desperate situation of actually sleeping in our streets before our government will "allow" us to assist them.

The federal government, along with unregulated banks, created the crisis and banks are being bailed out. Families end up living in crisis and get cut out of emergency assistance.

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Faith guides grassroots efforts in Washington County

BY SHERRY HARBERT
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Three years ago, Eric Canon, a metal sculptor, ventured upon an issue that would change his life. It was based on a simple question. Canon, who is a member of the Forest Grove United Church of Christ, was volunteering in an outreach program at his church when he began noticing the requests for help for basic food and shelter were growing. He also noticed that those asking for help were becoming more and more diverse. So he asked his outreach group about the condition of homelessness in the area. The answer first stunned Canon and the others — most of the homeless were families.

Canon was compelled to do something, so he reached out to his church. Canon and Russ Dondero, a retired political science professor at Pacific University, worked with a small group of volunteers to host a forum to bring the issue to the public's attention. They hosted a forum, Putting a Face on Homelessness, which brought together directors of the four family shelters in Washington County, affordable housing advocates, former homeless individuals and members of the faith community. The forum answered some questions and introduced even more.

But Canon and the others didn't have time to ponder about their next step. The most pressing issue was a shortfall of funding for the four family shelters in the county. The shelter directors warned they would have to cut services and they were already overwhelmed with the numbers. With only a total of 110 beds, they told of turning away 86 percent of the requests for emergency shelter. When Canon heard that the average age of those who were fortunate to get into

the shelters was a mere 12 years, he invited the public to a meeting to find ways to help. The result was the formation of the Interfaith Committee on Homelessness (IFCH) as a response from the faith community to collaborate and work on education and advocacy to end homelessness.

Today, the IFCH has established itself as the only grassroots organization in Washington county working to end homelessness. Its unique position allows members to advocate for policy changes on local and statewide levels, raise awareness in the faith community and help raise needed funds for shelters and affordable housing organizations.

What also makes the IFCH unique is its faith-driven strength to look at homeless issues with an unconditional set of values. Each individual, no matter what caused their homelessness, is considered a part of the community. And as such is worth the time and work it takes to help them. It is an unspoken, but constant focus that underlines all the efforts of the IFCH.

The IFCH's first campaign successfully raised \$20,000 from churches to stem the cuts of the family shelters three years ago. They also helped raise funds for The Community Housing Fund, a nonprofit based in Beaverton that leverages funds for affordable housing throughout the county. The IFCH collaborated with the Fund to host a forum on affordable housing in 2007. Members also testified at legislative hearings to push for funding. Dondero regularly went to Salem to advocate for affordable housing issues. He has been advocating for this issue for more than 20 years.

By 2008, the issue of homelessness began making news outside of the Portland-metro area. But the reality of the situation had yet to permeate into the public's mindset as a crisis. The group began to advocate for emergency shelters during the winter, now referred to as warming shelters.

Members of the IFCH, the Faith Café of Beaverton and several churches met at the Cedar Hills United Church of Christ on Jan. 5, 2008, to illustrate the situation for the public. The cold, rainy night provided a brief experience of surviving outside in the cold.

The group followed with a forum the following week to bring together churches, government and businesses to address the need for a concerted effort on ending homelessness. It would bring in multiple principles that helped push for the passage of HB 2436, which raised the document recording fee by \$15 to generate funds for affordable housing and homelessness services. The effort was coordinated by the Housing Alliance, an association of government, nonprofits, business and the IFCH. It was placed on a fast track and won passage before the enormous financial cuts in the state were announced.

Though the IFCH's accomplishments continue to grow, the homeless situation continues to overshadow those successes.

On April 13, the State of Oregon announced a 12.1 percent unemployment rate, its greatest level since the 1940s. On that same day, Annette Evans of the Washington County Department of Housing Services told the IFCH that the numbers of homeless in the county were also rising sharply. Evans said the two greatest causes for homelessness in the County were unemployment and the inability to afford

rent. The results were from the 2009 Point-in-Time Homeless Count for Washington County. The count, conducted every January per HUD guidelines, seeks to verify as many homeless as possible. County workers and volunteers sweep across the county to gather the annual numbers in an intense search because the dynamics of homelessness in the smaller cities and rural areas are much different than in Portland.

"Homelessness hides in Washington County," said Martha Moyer, one of the four board members of the IFCH. So the count has to be conducted in metropolitan and remote locations. The 2009 count found 1,243 homeless persons in Washington County with 449 listed as children. And that was in January.

"Our concern is that this count was before things got really busy," Evans told the audience. "If we were to do this count now, the numbers would be much larger."

The IFCH and several local churches are currently working on a plan to host a forum/workshop to address how churches can respond to homelessness. The churches which opened their doors as warming shelters during the winter experienced a direct look into the issue. Volunteers with the warming shelters tell of profound appreciation expressed by those they served, but are overwhelmed with the requests for help. The future forum/workshop will be designed to help educate and prepare churches for the growing demand. As they do each day, the churches are relying on faith to find solutions. It has been their faith that sustains their search and outreach.

Sherry Harbert is a resident of Washington County and a volunteer with the IFCH.