

Holding up the roof at the House

Affordable housing advocates set out their agenda for the State Legislature, hoping to preserve what little Oregon has to preserve housing and prevent homelessness

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The Housing Alliance is finalizing its advocacy agenda for the 2011 legislative cycle and preparing the case it will make to the state Legislature regarding why the state should support and, in some cases, bolster affordable housing programs.

In a year when the state's general fund has a \$3.5 billion shortfall and the Legislature will make massive cuts to state-funded programs, this is a Sisyphean task.

"This is not a good year to be asking the Legislature for money," says Beth Kaye, the Portland Housing Bureau's legislative affairs manager.

"There are already proposals circulating from all sides looking at really devastating cuts to the network of support," says Janet Byrd, the executive director of Neighborhood Partnerships and chair of the Housing Alliance, referring to cuts to welfare programs, mental health, drug addiction treatment programs, and others.

The Housing Alliance is a statewide, nonprofit collective of local governments, housing authorities, affordable housing developers, housing advocates, and advocacy organizations working to secure funding for affordable housing. The Alliance celebrated one of its most important victories in the 2009-2010 legislative cycle when the document recording fee was passed, which collects revenue from real estate transactions. It is, to date, the state's only dedicated source of revenue for affordable housing.

This year, the Housing Alliance's agenda includes a call to lawmakers to maintain support for the fee, and calls for using lottery-backed bonds to finance the preservation of existing affordable housing; increase and expand the rights of tenants who live in foreclosed properties, and pass a law that would make violent acts against homeless people a hate crime.

"It's a very strategic set of requests for this economy," Kaye says.

Many agenda items ask the Legislature to simply maintain funding for programs, such as not diverting part or all of the document recording fee to other programs, and extend the sunset of an Oregon statute allowing affordable housing developers to receive tax abatements, which provide lenders an incentive to invest in affordable properties for their preservation.

"It's mostly about maintaining what we've got," says Cathey Briggs, the executive

director of the Oregon Opportunity Network, a coalition of affordable housing developers. "We don't want to lose ground."

"It's more critical than ever that we hold firm," says Sheila Greenlaw-Fink, the executive director of Community Partners for Affordable Housing.

The consequences, sources say, will be dire. "The need is greater than ever," Briggs says.

If the Legislature does not maintain its support for affordable housing programs and fund a small number of key programs that prevent people from becoming homeless, housing advocates and providers fear that more people will become less stable than they already are and possibly

Housing Account, known as the EHA. The EHA, the Housing Alliance says, "is our most flexible resource to end and prevent homelessness." Created in 1991, the EHA is used to pay for emergency shelter, motel vouchers, rental assistance, utility payments, and other services designed to keep people from becoming homeless.

The EHA has been funded at the same level, \$5.2 million, since 1991. But its budget was decreased by slightly in last year's budget cuts.

For the past two years, funding from the federal stimulus bill has supplemented the EHA efforts. The federal program, called Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing (HPRP), gave Oregon \$15 million dollars over the past two years; \$4.5 million was

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF NORTHWEST HOUSING ALTERNATIVES

become homeless.

"What's at stake is a lot of human suffering," Kaye says.

With no end to the recession and Oregon's high unemployment figures in sight, a low-income person's instability and homelessness could last far longer than it would have in economically better times.

"When people become destabilized, getting them back on track is really time consuming and really expensive," says Martha McLennan, the executive director of Northwest Housing Alternatives, an affordable housing developer in Clackamas County.

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There is one program the Housing Alliance is asking the Legislature to increase funding for. That is the Emergency

allocated to the Portland area. Maileen Hampto, the public information officer for the Portland Housing Bureau, says all of the money was given to the Housing Authority of Portland and used as short-term rent assistance.

Other local jurisdictions used the money in different ways as a stopgap to prevent people from becoming homeless, and rapidly rehousing people who had recently become homeless.

"That acted a lot like the EHA," Bryd says.

But 2011 is the last year that federal stimulus money will be available in the state. After that, the only money available to prevent people from becoming homeless will be the EHA.

With a sudden hole in how the state provided rent assistance and other funds preventing people from becoming homeless, housing advocates are looking to the state Legislature to increase EHA funding.

Bryd says it's not known at this time how

SEE THE ROOF, page 5