

Poverty figures unlikely to change course anytime soon

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

Census figures released Tuesday put on paper what many of us have known for a long time. Times are tough, getting tougher.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's figures, the nation's official poverty rate in 2010 increased from 14.3 percent in 2009 to 15.1 percent — the third consecutive annual increase in the poverty rate and the highest since 1993. The Bureau estimates that more than 2.5 million entered poverty in 2010, totaling more than 46 million Americans. It is the fourth consecutive increase in that figure, and the highest number since poverty estimates have been published.

Oregon's poverty rate is at 14.1 percent, essentially unchanged from 2009.

"The increase in poverty obviously means that there is a greater need for a social safety net," said Chuck Sheketoff, executive director of the Oregon Center for Public Policy. "We think today's news about the increase in the poverty rate means that both Congress and the state need to start creating a good, robust jobs program and raising the necessarily revenues to fund the public services to lift people out of poverty."

Sheketoff said the figures were not surprising, given the severity of the recession and the anemic recovery.

"Oregon has never done a good job at reducing the poverty rate," Sheketoff said. "And unfortunately we have no one in state government who is responsible for that."

In 2009, the Oregon State Legislature did raise taxes to cover the budget shortfall for basic services. The 2011 legislature did not, a move Sheketoff calls ill-advised. Among the reductions this year were cuts to the employment and skills training programs and child care services for low-income parents seeking employment.

The numbers may be the highest since 1993, but the conditions are different, Sheketoff said.

"Our safety net for poor families with children was better in the early 1990s," he said. "We had a more robust program for families with dependent children, a more

robust jobs program and skills program. We are serving a smaller percentage of the poor than we used to and we're giving them less. The legislature wrongly scaled back the basic job opportunity and skills program. We've let inflation erode access and made cutbacks."

On the front lines is the Oregon and Southwest Washington hub of 211Info, the resource referral network, where call takers are hearing the reality of the numbers.

"Anecdotally, we are starting to have difficult conversations with formerly middle-class people who can't understand why there isn't a safety net for them," said Liesl Wendt, 211Info executive director.

Among the questions callers are asking more frequently are:

"My unemployment is going to run out. I already can't pay my bills, but I won't have anywhere to live if I can't pay my rent. Where am I supposed to go?" Wendt said.

Human Solutions works to help low-income families get into housing, connect with employment and support services, and get out of poverty. Executive Director Jean Demaster says they too started seeing an increase in the number of people feeling desperate about their financial situation and their prospects.

"We're seeing many more people who are not able to pay their rent who are coming to us with eviction notices," Demaster said. "They're desperate because they just put their kids in school, and now they can't pay their rent for October, so their kids could be pulled out of school, they could lose their apartment. It's just a sense of desperation."

Wendt says that call takers are responding with what available resources do exist, however, they are starting to see more people reach out for help and be turned away as agency resources hit their ceilings.

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, 211INFO FOR
SW WASHINGTON AND OREGON

"People are seeking assistance that just does not exist: help paying for cell phone service or online service so they can continue to look for work; gas money so they can drive to interviews or research potential employers; transportation assistance so they can tend to a dying family member in another state, or attend a funeral," Wendt says.

It's no surprise that the Federal Poverty Level, used to determine eligibility for many low-income assistance programs, has inched up as well. For an individual, that figure is just under \$11,000 a year, or \$908 a month. For a family of four, the poverty level is \$22,350, or \$1,863 a month.

The child poverty rate hit a record high of 22 percent, a level not seen since 1994. For children under age 6, the poverty rate between 2009 and 2010 increased to 25.3 percent from 23.8 percent, altogether tallying 6.3 million children on the poverty rolls.

"A financially stable family gives children the best chance at a healthy, safe and successful life," said Children First For Oregon Policy Director Regan Gray. "These numbers show that now, more than ever, it's critical that legislators continue to fund programs like Employment Related Day Care and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), which allow parents to find work while providing for their children's most fundamental needs."

Both of those programs suffered budget cutbacks this year.

More detailed information on the state of Oregon's children will be released Sept. 22 when the American Community Survey state-by-state data is made available.

Demaster said that at the same time people are coming to Human Solutions because their income has declined, the

amount of money the organization has to provide help with is also shrinking, in part from federal cuts to the emergency food and shelter program.

"We're going to get more families who eventually will become homeless because they don't have the money to pay the rent; more people coming to use needing energy assistance because they can't get their utilities on."

Demaster said she expects to see another year or more of hardship for people in low incomes, with no light at the end of the tunnel unless policies change. Demaster says she supports a job program to put people back to work, not only for immediate relief but also future family stability.

"As these conditions get worse, many times it means families have to split apart, and when that happens that means that the kids get farmed out to relatives, and sometimes that's a positive situation, but a lot of times that's a negative situation," Demaster said. "It has a long term effect of kids not going to school, not getting the support and nurturing they need, and the family not building strong communities. ... The cycle just repeats itself."

Among the numbers released by the Census Bureau this week:

- The poverty rate and the number in poverty increased for both married-couple families (6.2 percent and 3.6 million in 2010 from 5.8 percent and 3.4 million in 2009) and female-householder-with-no-husband-present families (31.6 percent and 4.7 million in 2010 from 29.9 percent and 4.4 million in 2009). For families with a male householder no wife present, the poverty rate and the number in poverty were not statistically different from 2009.

- While the poverty rates for children increased, it was not statistically different for people 65 and older (9 percent).

- The median household income declined from \$50,599 to \$49,445. Among western states, the median household income dropped from \$54,722 to \$53,142, which, given the methodology, is considered statistically insignificant.

Veterans Stand Down & Job Fair event, Sept. 20

All veterans and their families are welcome at the Veterans Stand Down & Job Fair — a free event with access to dozens of employers and agencies on Tuesday, September 20th from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. at the Oregon Convention Center. Attendees are urged to bring their resumes; 50-plus employers are expected.

In times of war, Stand Downs were the opportunity for combat units to take time to rest and recover at secure base camp areas. This year, there will be nearly 100 Stand Down events held across the country. Last year, the Portland Stand Down attracted more than 600 veterans.

Portland's Stand Down is organized by Central City Concern in collaboration Department of Veterans Affairs, Returning Veterans, Oregon Paralyzed Veterans of America, WorkSource Oregon and other community organizations. Call Central City Concern at 503-226-7387 or visit www.portlandstanddown.org for more event details.

CORRECTIONS

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Cookbook features good eats from the streets

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Mailbox Muffins, and other recipes from the Gulf Coast Homeless. Copies are available online and at Powell's.

Recently released by Changing Lives Press, "Mailbox Muffins" is a cookbook unlike other cookbooks. Its recipes are written by the homeless. Six featured chefs provide their favorite recipes, many prepared while living out-of-doors in Gulfport, Miss. Some of these recipes highlight quintessential local fare — jambalaya, shrimp, hot sauce, Vietnamese cuisine. Others emphasize food bank and camping trip staples like tuna fish, macaroni and cheese, spaghetti, canned vegetables and meats. Even with some of the offerings as mundane as tuna noodle salad, readers begin getting to know the chefs' personalities.

Each chef's recipes are framed by personal narratives about how they became homeless and what their experiences were of Hurricane Katrina. (Gulfport is about eighty miles from New Orleans.) For the most part they describe the hurricane itself as a peripheral event since they had limited access to media, though it did entail lots of MREs (meals ready to eat). More poignant, however, are challenges they faced with their families, their employment, and their emotional well-being. For those who've experienced homelessness themselves, there may not be anything particularly revelatory here; and yet, narratives about conditions leading to homelessness are always important, especially in the surprising context of a cookbook.

The chefs bring an array of cooking experiences, from John's work at the Gulfport Yacht Club to Bobby's development of a mailbox oven, to Julie's meal preparation for

her son. Certain recipes accommodate rudimentary cooking supplies while others are meant for the trappings of an indoor kitchen. This spectrum represents a transition for each chef, from unhoused to housed, and now living in the Oregon Place Apartments.

A project of local philanthropists and Mississippi Cares International, Inc., the 56-unit building was purchased from Fannie Mae, and receives various government grants. The mission of Oregon Place is "to provide transitional workforce housing for homeless people so they can live in a safe and secure place while learning basic skills and/or a trade that can be used to re-enter the work place and regain their place in society."

Though not a homeless shelter, residents may earn no more than 50 percent of the area's median income and are expected to take part in education or job re-training. Book proceeds go to support Oregon Place, the roof over the heads (and the kitchens) of chefs-in-residence Bobby, Crystal, Charles, Julie, John and Howard.

Mailbox Cornbread

Ingredients:

1 box of cornbread mix
water (according to directions on box)
empty 1-inch deep tuna fish cans

Directions: Heat mailbox oven (described at length in the book). Combine cornbread mix and water and mix well. Fill tuna fish cans with mixture and bake for 45 minutes. Remove mailbox from fire and allow to cool. Eat cornbread straight from cans.