

# Diaper demand indicative of families in need

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Every Tuesday night, a small group gathers outside of the First Baptist Church, waiting for the doors to open for a weekly hot meal. This particular line, though, looks a little different than many others in downtown Portland. As a long-haired man with a wide smile opens the door precisely at six o'clock, young men pushing strollers and women with toddlers hoisted on their hips pass through.

This line is made up entirely of families. They come to the weekly Dinner and a Movie gathering to eat, watch a film on the church's projector screen and occasionally pick up donated clothes or personal items.

They come also for something much less recreational and far more essential: diapers.

Diapers aren't covered by food stamps, need to be replenished constantly and have to fit properly to do their job. And with families now the fastest-growing segment of Portland's homeless population — last year's Point-In-Time Count of Homelessness showed a 35 percent increase in the number of unsheltered families with children — the need for diapers has never been more urgent.

"I've gotten my son's diapers here for his entire life," Kevin, a 35-year-old single dad, says on a recent Tuesday night over a plate of spaghetti and meatballs. "This place is like my family now."

He started attending Dinner and a Movie more than 10 years ago. At that time, he says he was a homeless youth prone to violence. Today, he volunteers alongside the organization's leaders, who eventually helped him into Narcotics Anonymous, find stable housing and retain custody of his son Alex, now 3 years old.

Kevin's face, with its easy smile and bright blue eyes, is now the first to greet families as they file in on Tuesday nights.

While the youngest guests play together in the nursery, their parents sit down to a movie — on this night it's "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom" — and look through the donation table's pile of clothes for their kids' sizes. The bags of diapers are doled out carefully, with one bag of 20 diapers for



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Families with children have become the fastest growing population of people experiencing homelessness, leading to a rising demand for diapers.

each child.

Jen Lawrence, the program's development director, estimates the group gave away 800 packages of diapers last year. "It's a real need," she said.

Dinner and a Movie took note in the rise in the number of homeless families years ago and changed its program to accommodate the new demographic. The outreach began in 2001 as a way to reach homeless youth, allowing anyone younger than 25 to come for a meal and a movie. About four or five years ago, Lawrence, says, many of those street kids started coming with babies of their own. Lawrence said they looked at what resources were already available in Portland and decided the families needed them more.

"How can you make a bigger impact than trying to effect the next generation?" Lawrence asks. "We decided to be the support that many of these parents need to break the cycles of abuse that might have brought them to the street in the first place."

Not only are diapers necessary for children's basic health and hygiene, but they are crucial for parents who rely on day care. Most daycare centers require a full day's supply of fresh diapers in order for a baby or toddler to attend. When a family does not have enough diapers, the parents may not be able to go to work or job interviews.

Like many of Portland's family-focused services, Dinner and a Movie looks to another local nonprofit, Northwest Children's Outreach (NCO), for the diapers they distribute each week to families like Kevin and Alex. The large faith-based organization operates seven drop-off centers

across the greater Portland area, including two in Washington state.

Individuals donate children's items, such as clothing and toys, and NCO volunteers sort the items and prepare packages for the shelters, caseworkers and other clients that serve families in need. Last year, they gave out over half a million diapers.

"Diapers are our single biggest need," says Debbie Sherwood, president of NCO. "After we pay our building expenses, which are relatively small, any monetary donations we receive go to buying diapers."

Bridges to Housing, a family-focused housing program, estimates that more than 2,500 families in the Portland-Vancouver area are without safe, permanent shelter on any given night.

Northwest Children's Outreach impacts many of those families by working with more than 200 agencies to distribute diapers, clothing and toys. Caseworkers and program directors like Lawrence place weekly orders based on their regular clients' requests, but sometimes the demand outpaces the supply.

"It's a basic need, and we definitely cannot fill all of the orders we receive," Sherwood says. "Without a reliable supply, we know mothers have to make tough choices and get creative."

Sherwood's caseworkers report that some mothers choose to diaper their babies only at night, changing wet clothes and cleaning up as best they can through the day. One mother she knows lines her baby's diaper with a paper towel. When the baby wets the diaper, she simply changes the towel, stretching out her 20-diapers-per-week supply.

One local mother who experienced this frustration firsthand is hoping to make a difference by founding a new organization, the PDX Diaper Bank.

"When my husband was in law school, we were on the receiving end of services," Rachel Alston says. "We qualified for food stamps and all kinds of aid, but there was nothing for diapers."

Still in its planning stages, the group hopes to become a centralized donation center (similar to Northwest Children's Outreach) but one focusing solely on providing diapers to agencies for distribution.

Just last year, mega-brand Huggies partnered with a few diaper banks around the country (including Westside Baby in Seattle) to found the National Diaper Bank Network. Alston has applied to become a partner bank with the network, allowing Portland families to benefit from bulk and corporate donations on a much larger scale.

"We'll collect diapers from individual donors and companies and store them similar to how a food bank operates," Alston says. "But instead of distributing diapers directly to families, we'll work with local nonprofits that already have an existing client base."

Alston hopes to include cloth diapers as part of the PDX Diaper Bank, but only if parents in need request them. While cloth diapers are reusable and less costly in the long term than disposable diapers, many families do not have easy access to washers and dryers.

The report was produced as part of a collaboration between Street Roots and Portland State University.



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