



Above, Oregon House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, addressing the members of the Housing Alliance who gathered in Salem April 4 to speak with their representatives. The event drew more than 150 people with experiences in homelessness and housing problems, who called for more equity in Section 8, veterans and HIV/AIDS housing programs, and emergency housing assistance. Below, David Henderson of Portland went to speak about his own experience with homelessness and now, thanks to several social-service programs, being housed and on his own.

PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER

Housing takes center stage in Salem

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

They carpoled and packed into buses, wearing buttons in solidarity and some paired in matching T-shirts. More than 150 of them, of all ages, abilities and backgrounds, made the trip.

They came for Housing Opportunity Lobby Day, April 4, at the State Capitol, where lawmakers paused to open their doors to people's personal testimony on the challenges they've faced.

They gathered early in Salem before heading out to talk with lawmakers about what's at stake in this legislative session, including funding for emergency housing programs, foreclosure prevention, veterans' housing and access to housing for Section 8 recipients. It was one of the largest coalitions the Alliance has sent to Salem, and together they met with more than 65 legislators to talk about housing issues.

They included David Henderson, who will be 60 in June. Henderson is a former human resources consultant for a large apparel company. About two years ago, he lost his job and shortly thereafter became disabled. He now has difficulty walking and speaking. He was unable to work, and without a home. "I was living in places of last resort," he said, and that included the Portland Rescue Mission.

Through the help of Northwest Pilot Project, Transition Projects and emergency housing funds, he was able to get out of the shelter and into his own apartment.

"I want to see how our legislators are addressing the problem of housing," Henderson said. "I want to make sure our representatives know how important it is to us."

Ron Deason, 65, had a long career in construction work when he had an accident in 2005. It left him unable to work in the field. He had saved up a year's worth of his salary for tough times and received a settlement for his injury, but the money ran out while he waited for his Social Security Insurance to arrive. In all, he waited three years.

"I went from hero to zero just from falling and getting hurt," he says.

He lost his home, and lived in his car for seven months. In the woods where he parked his car, he saw generations of homelessness — grandfathers, fathers and sons, he says. He caught pneumonia and ended up in the hospital for seven days and



PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER

\$150,000. He had no insurance and no money. But with assistance to tide him over, he's back on his feet and in housing. He was in Salem, he says, "because I don't want anybody to go through what I went through."

Amal Ahmed wanted to tell her representative about how important basic services were in keeping her family going after they emigrated from Somalia in 1996 to escape violence. Her mother came here with three young children to care for, and she soon became very ill. She was suffering from seizures and acute depression stemming from past trauma, and the opportunity for new work never arrived.

"If there was no system at that moment, no program supporting people, no energy assistance or housing programs or medical programs, my family wouldn't be where we are now," Ahmed says. Ahmed now works for Human Solutions, which helps find and secure stable housing for other families struggling to get by.

Pat came to support better access to housing for tenants with Section 8 vouchers. She learned first hand how difficult it is to find a landlord to lease to a Section 8 recipient. After 60 days, she was unable to find an apartment to lease to her, and she lost the voucher. Pat's friend, Deborah Olson, came on the same issue, and handed to her lawmaker a recent newspaper's

classified section with the "No Section 8" ads circled in red.

"Even if the ad didn't say 'No Section 8,' they told me so when I was there," Pat said.

There were many others with similar stories.

John Wood is unable to work because he has Parkinson's disease. He is both a resident and board member with Northwest Housing Initiatives, without which he says he would not have a place to live. Like many others there that day, it was his first time in the State Capitol building.

"These are our people and we've got to take care of our people," Wood said, noting that the experience instills a greater sense of ownership in the legislative process.

"You realize how important we are. This is extremely important what we're doing," Wood said.

"Unless you do something yourself, nothing is going to get done," Deason said. "To stand on your feet and have some pride. When you lose your pride, you've lost your fight."

Deason had 15 minutes with his representative, Jules Bailey (D-Portland).

"I've never been involved in something like this before," he said afterward. "It's kind of nice going there and seeing someone who cares. They look you right in the eyes."

The Housing Agenda

The Housing Opportunity Lobby Day was organized by the Housing Alliance with five key areas of focus in the 2013 Legislature:

Prevent homelessness through restoring the Emergency Housing Account and State Homeless Assistance Program — The Emergency Housing Account (EHA) and State Homeless Assistance Program (SHAP) help keep at risk families in their homes, and help homeless families get off the streets and stabilized. The Housing Alliance is requesting an additional \$3 million to EHA and \$1 million to SHAP in general fund dollars to return the programs to the level of the 2007 biennium, plus inflation.

Housing for Veterans HB 2417 — To cover the continuum of veterans' housing needs, including ending their homelessness, offering short- and long-term rental assistance, developing housing with wrap-around services as well as increasing home-ownership opportunities.

Foreclosure and housing market recovery SB 558 — In 2012, Oregon enacted foreclosure reform with SB 1552, with the Legislature dedicating some funds from the National Attorneys' General Settlement to the implementation of the law. This bill provides additional resources to continue building a system to provide homeowners with information, counseling, legal support, mediation services and direct financial relief.

Preserve Existing Affordable Housing — Across the state, thousands of people with very low incomes live in homes with federal rent subsidies and in manufactured home parks. Many of these homes are at risk of conversion to market rate, including some housing built and owned by nonprofit partners statewide. The alliance is asking for \$20 million in Lottery Backed Bonds to fill financing gaps and preserve these affordable homes.

Remove barriers for tenants with Section 8 vouchers to renting homes in their preferred communities HB 2639 — The proposal includes multiple strategies to ensure tenant success such as developing statewide strategies to better support tenants going through the leasing process, better support of housing authorities' efforts to educate and work with both landlords and HUD, as well as to amend ORS 659A.421 (1)(d) and (2)(e) to clarify that receipt of federal rent subsidies and other housing assistance — in particular Section 8 vouchers — is not grounds for denying tenancy.



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