

Hunger at home in suburbia



PHOTO BY ROBERT BRITT

A woman reaches for a can of food at the SnowCap pantry in Rockwood. The pantry, established for low-income individuals and families, has seen its customer base grow rapidly over the years and now sees more than 8,000 customers a month.

Food insecurity a primary benchmark in our rising suburban poverty

BY NATHAN GILLES
STAFF WRITER

ENTERING
Portland Suburbia
Population in poverty:
189,515 (and rising)

This is the second in our periodic series on suburban poverty. According to a new study by The Brookings Institute, the rate of poverty in the Portland-area suburbs rose 99 percent since 2000.

It's lunchtime at Alder Elementary in the east Portland suburb of Gresham, and even though it's summer, the school's gym-turned-cafeteria is packed with children. There are about 80 grade school kids sitting at benches munching away at sandwiches and fruit as about 20 parents look on. This food is free, and that's important says Lena Fox, who oversees the meals' distribution, because without this extra help many of these low-income kids might go hungry.

"We really worry in the summer about what kind of food is available because we know a lot of them (students) face hunger issues," says Fox.

Fox coordinates the Schools Uniting Neighborhoods, or SUN, program for Alder. A joint effort between the Oregon Food Bank, Multnomah County, and Metropolitan Family Service, the poverty-abatement program expects to serve thousands of summers meals like this one at Alder and its other affiliated schools. Like Alder, many of these schools are not in Portland but in its suburbs. This, say experts, is poverty's new landscape: America's suburbs now have more people in poverty than its cities.

According to a recent Brookings Institution report ("Our Sinking Suburbs," Street Roots, June 21), between 2000 and 2011 poverty grew in America's suburbs by 64 percent, or roughly twice the rate it grew in the nation's cities. During the

same period, poverty nearly doubled in Portland and Vancouver area suburbs, outpacing the two cities which together saw poverty grow by 71 percent.

From housing to unemployment, the new landscape of poverty has many metrics. But hunger, in particular, draws some stark lines on Portland's metro area map, clearly depicting poverty's suburban migration.

"Are you guys hungry? Did you already eat?" Fox asks a mother clutching her young son. The woman looks reluctant to enter the noisy cafeteria. The coordinator assures the mother that it's OK and that the food is free.

The mother looks skeptical. But Fox's face is warm and disarming. After waiting in the doorway for a few minutes, she puts her ambivalence aside. She enters the cafeteria and grabs a tray for her son.

The food is free and not just for the children. Along with serving lunch, SUN also serves kids breakfast over the summer. During the school year, it provides qualifying students a meal before they head home. "We don't want them to go home and not eat," explains Fox. But Fox says the program isn't just about helping kids. It's also about helping families.

That's why year-round SUN schools provide qualifying neighborhood families with a 3-to-5-day supply of food. This is done via eight metro-area schools that double as pantries. Alder is one of

these. According to numbers provided by SUN Hunger Relief Coordinator Rick Freed, last year Alder alone gave out 45,000 meals through its pantry. And these meals were needed.

Alder is located in Gresham's Rockwood neighborhood where above average rates of poverty and the number of kids on free and reduced meals; 95 percent of Alder students qualify for the program. It is by many accounts the most impoverished neighborhood in the Portland metro region and Multnomah County. But Rockwood isn't so much an outlier as a poster child for poverty's suburban shift.

SUN on the Map

Currently, SUN's 68 schools are split roughly in half between Portland Public Schools, the Portland's central school district, and the outlying districts. But hunger's suburban presence really pops on the map when looking at SUN pantries.

Six of SUN's eight pantries are within Portland city limits with the remaining two in Gresham. However, five of those six Portland pantries are located in east Portland in the once expanding strips malls and track homes that made up the city's post-war suburbs. Many of these burbs have since been incorporated by Portland. But incorporation hasn't kept these former suburbs — now known as East Portland — from experiencing

See **HUNGER**, page 4

Inside



Sharing a smile

Customers rally to restore a vendor's pearly whites

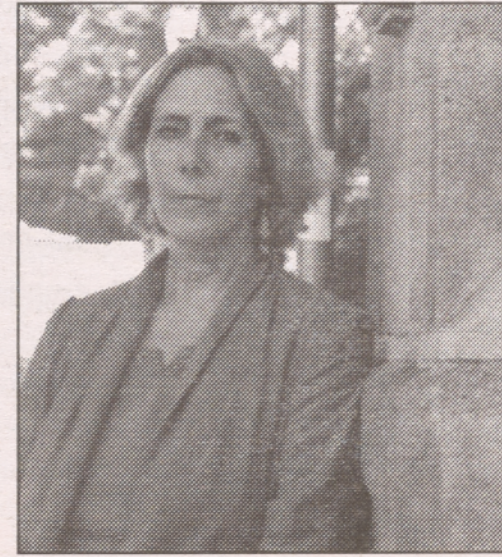
Page 3



We can 'change people's lives'

Oregon's new DHS director on meeting a growing demand

Page 5



Keeping watch over Vista Bridge

Volunteers patrol to prevent more suicides

Page 8