

## Housing Rural Oregon

# HOMELESSNESS up close and personal

BY ARKADY BROWN | STAFF WRITER

One woman, one 10-year-old boy, two cats, two dogs, all living in a van in a Walmart parking lot. This is what home looks like for Sara Moore and her son, Josh.\*

Homelessness is widespread across Oregon. We all see it, but what many people don't understand is the daily struggle and juggle of surviving.

Sara's story started in Portland when she and her son were evicted from their apartment in July. After chasing one lead to another, they found themselves in Coos Bay and decided to stay.

Sara wants people to understand something about homelessness: "It's way harder than people assume to get out of it once you're in it."

For most homeless individuals, the priority is finding shelter, a job and food. In most rural places, these resources are incredibly limited and underfunded. This is how it affects people experiencing homelessness on a personal level.



Sara Moore and son Josh, 10, live with two dogs and two cats in their van in Coos Bay. They've found a "vanning" community in the Walmart lot where they park (right). PHOTOS BY ARKADY BROWN



### Shelter

In Coos Bay, Sara said there is only one shelter Sara could qualify for, the South Coast Gospel Mission, but it doesn't allow animals.

The wait list for low-income housing is just as long as in Portland, she said. And there is an overall housing shortage in Coos Bay. So, like many other families, she and Josh "van" in the Walmart parking lot.

They have found a small community of "vanning" friends who look out for one another as much as they can. They park their cars next to one another's for extra safety, and when times get tough, they pool their resources.

For the most part, this local Walmart appears to tolerate its back parking lot being dedicated to the homeless

community. The local police even drive through from time to time to make sure everyone remains safe.

Sara knows her situation is not sustainable. At the time she spoke with Street Roots, she was attempting to get a used RV. For her, this

would be a more permanent situation because no one can take it away from her, and it can go wherever they need to go.

### Food

The Coos Bay area has five shelters that serve hot meals to people experiencing homelessness, according to The Devereux Center, one of the shelters. Several serve hot meals Monday through Saturday. Sara avoids the one that serves on Sundays, she said, because it caters to male clientele, and she fears encountering sex offenders.

For Sara, accessing a hot meal depends on having enough gas in the van. Many times, she's had enough gas to get to the shelter, but not enough to return to home base. These are the days they've had to miss a meal. And on Sundays - Sara's hardest day - the support of her vanning community is crucial.

Sara is also on food stamps, receiving \$257 a month. That's roughly \$60 a week to feed her and her son. They have gone without food in the past.

Storing food is a challenge though. Sara has a cooler in her van, but it doesn't keep food cold for more than a few days. This leads to more frequent grocery store trips and a higher food bill.

Another struggle is their lack of cooking

facilities. Walmart is not a fan of fires of any sort in their parking lots. Sara said that they've tried going to the beach to cook a meal, but they just end up wasting propane because of the wind.

By the end of the month, most people in the vanning community have run out of money for food and gas, and most have used up their food stamps. Sara and her vanning friends are quick to share their food and supplies with others who are more in need. As Michelle, Sara's friend, explained: "We don't have a lot, but we share a lot."

### Employment

Sara is college educated and has a strong work background. Finding companies that are hiring is not hard. There are "help wanted" signs all over Coos Bay, she said. Even looking online, one can find a lot of companies hiring.

The hard part comes when Sarah has to put down an address.

In Portland, there are numerous shelters that allow individuals to use their addresses on applications. In Coos Bay, there are three, but two require the individuals to actually live there. This leaves Sara with one option, The Devereux Center, which has a well-known and well-used address.

Sara believes that when employers see her address, they immediately know she's homeless and won't consider her for a position. This is based on her numerous attempts to apply for work. She said she applied for 15 jobs in a two-week period and never heard back from any of them.

In a small town, the discrimination and shame experienced by homeless people is exacerbated. And on the coast, where meth addiction runs high, there is a stereotype that people who are homeless are addicts.

Sara understands that she could probably get a fast-food job, but she said it's a "double-edged sword." If she were to apply for a better job elsewhere, she said, the small time of working at a fast-food restaurant could raise a red flag and discourage better employers.

At the time Sara spoke with Street Roots, she was receiving \$432 a month in welfare assistance. To keep her benefits, Sara is required to search and apply for jobs 35 hours a week.

The average price of a one-bedroom apartment in Coos Bay is \$600; \$760 for a 2 bedroom, according to November rental statistics.

### Pets

Another big issue for Sara is her animals.

The shelters in Coos Bay don't allow the animals inside the premises. And as one might imagine, a car with two dogs and two cats can have some foul odors. Sara is well aware of the smell. Regardless, she is dedicated to keeping their family together.

If she didn't have the animals, Sara would potentially have an easier time finding shelter for her and Josh. She has even been accused of putting her animals before her son. To that, she says her animals are their family. Josh would be devastated without their companionship.

Not only that, but their dog Phoenix, who's part Dobermann, is their security guard. He is the first to notice when someone is trying to break into their van in the middle of the night.

Above all, the animals keep Sara and Josh warm. As the winter months roll in, staying warm is getting harder and harder.

### Optimism

Daily life is stressful, and so is homeless life. And Sara and her friend Michelle are upfront that they enjoy the occasional bottle of wine or beer when money allows.

"Just because we are in this position does not mean we are not allowed the same kind of liberty and freedom that other people are allowed," Michelle said.

Both Sara and Michelle said that there's an expectation that when you're homeless, you should have nothing. It leaves them feeling small and demeaned.

At the end of the day, there is light at the end of the tunnel for Sara and Josh.

"This isn't the end of the world," Sara said. "A lot of people think that once this happens to you, this is it."

Sara and Michelle said it's good that their kids are acclimating to this way of living. Yes, they might know more about life than they should, but they know not to judge people for the way they live or look. The mothers are proud of the lessons their kids are learning.

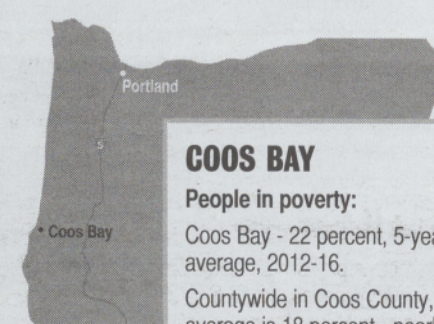
Recently, Sara has been able to purchase a used RV and is now on the hunt for finding a place to park it long term. She has also found part-time work and is trying to obtain a job at the Department of Human Services.

"We are crawling out of this," she said, "one firmly placed nail at a time."

\* Sara, Michelle and Josh are pseudonyms. They did not want their real names used because of their homeless situation.

### About this series

This article is part of Street Roots' Housing Rural Oregon series. Street Roots received funding from Meyer Memorial Trust's Affordable Housing Initiative to develop dedicated reporting on rural housing issues. The goal is to broaden our views around housing policy to promote better understanding of the issues communities face across the state. We also intend to highlight the common ground that we all share, and the solutions we can all get behind.



### COOS BAY

#### People in poverty:

Coos Bay - 22 percent, 5-year average, 2012-16.

Countywide in Coos County, the average is 18 percent - nearly 11,000 people. But in its rural towns, poverty rates spike between 22 and 31 percent.

#### Homeless:

The 2015 Point in Time Homeless Count tallied 612 people who were homeless, although those numbers are widely considered an undercount.

\*Source: Oregon Housing and Community Services 2015 Report on Poverty