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pantries are often the easiest way to fill monthly budget gaps caused by less elastic costs for housing, medical needs and transportation. And the Oregon Food Bank, a statewide network of 21 regional food banks that serve 468 pantries like Junction City's – plus another 179 meal sites and 596 supplemental programs and partners – is seeing the pressures of housing costs spill into their work.

Anneliese Koehler, Oregon Food Bank's public policy advocate, said the rates of hunger started to climb during the recession and have never dropped back to what they were before.

According to a study by Mark Edwards of Oregon State University's Rural Studies Program, the percentage of Oregonians experiencing food insecurity between 2013 and 2015 rose from 11.9 to 16.1 percent.

The U.S. Bureau of Housing and Urban Development's standard for what is considered "affordable housing" is that rent or mortgage costs consume no more than 30 percent of a household income.

In Lane County, one out of three renters pays more than 50 percent of income in rent, according to the advocacy network Oregon Housing Alliance. For every 100 families with extremely low incomes, there are only 15 affordable units available.

Homes For Good, the county's housing authority and the state's second largest, opened up a Section 8 wait-list last year. Nearly 5,000 people signed up in two weeks. Spokesperson Ela Kubok said that's twice the number from an opening five years ago.

Between its public housing and Section 8 wait lists, there are 6,040 applicants waiting for Homes For Good housing assistance, representing 12,195 people.

The agency's executive director, Jacob Fox, said the area's housing crisis hasn't been quite as acute as in Multnomah County, but is seeing "very aggressive" rent increases that are rapidly bringing it to that level.

Realtor.com placed nearby Eugene as the second-tightest housing market in the nation last year, after Seattle; Portland came in eighth.

"It's increasing people's rent beyond 30, up into 40 percent of their income," Fox said. "For folks that pay 40 percent of their rent, that's 10 percent less flex funds they have to buy food and medication."

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Lane County's poverty rate approaches 20 percent, compared with a statewide average of just over 13 percent.

Rodley said Junction City has seen an influx of new residents from Eugene, about 15 miles south. Some are surprised to realize there are poor or homeless people living there, too. New housing built to accommodate them is "not necessarily affordable" for most Junction City regulars, Rodley said.

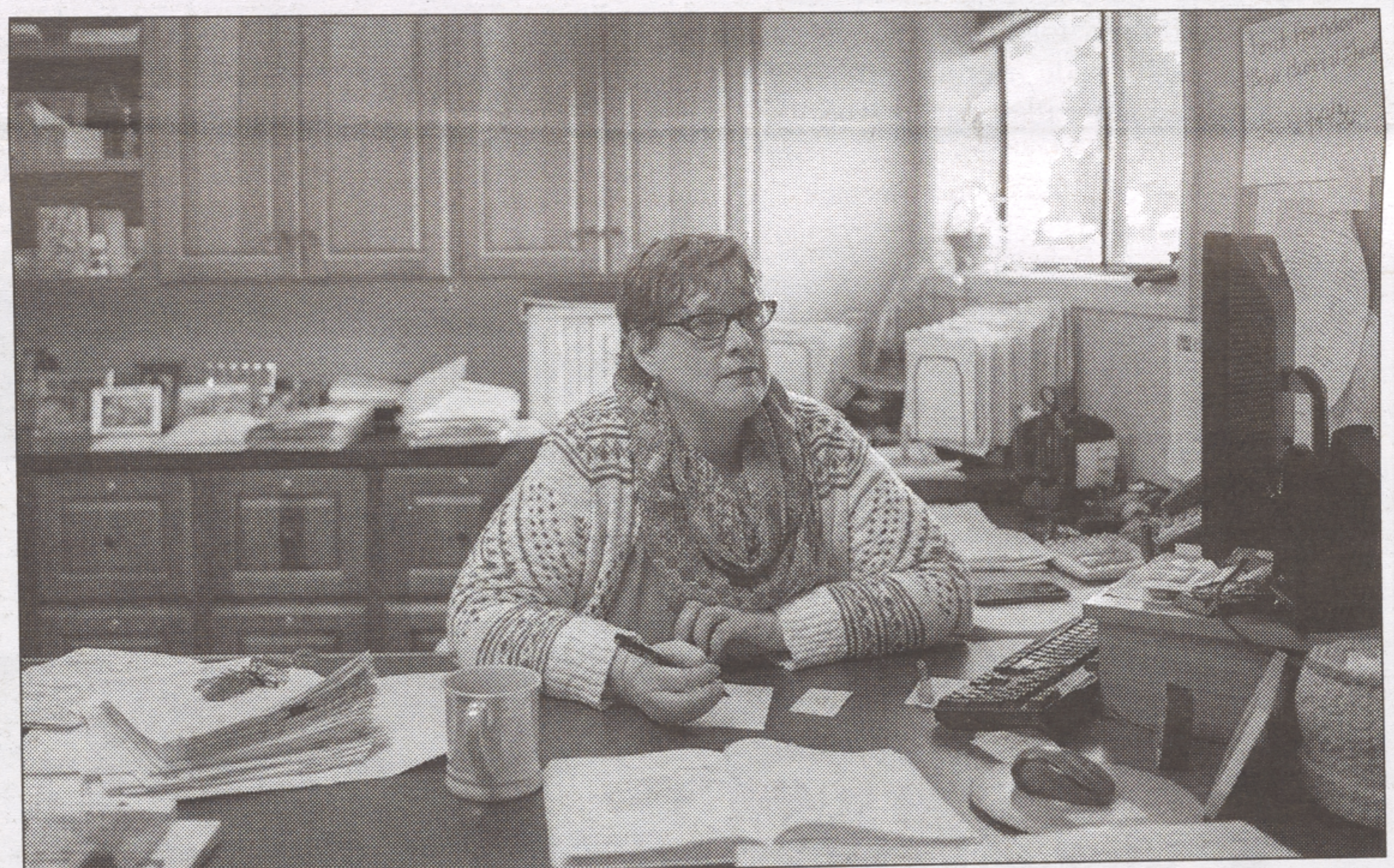
"People tend to think of this (housing instability and food insecurity) as an urban issue," she said. "It's actually just as acute, and probably more nuanced, in a rural area."

The pantry serves working-class families, whose needs may tilt toward short-term crises, but for aging Baby Boomers and those with disabilities, "we are a key piece of their (long-term) puzzle," Rodley said.

Housing has become intertwined with Oregon Food Bank's agenda, ranking just

PHOTOS BY CELESTE NOCHE

Jeanie Burr sorts through the weekly grocery options at Junction City Local Aid's food pantry Feb. 14. Burr said she and her husband, who live on $1,200 a month from their two Social Security incomes, pay $300 per month for food on top of what they get from the pantry.



Kori Rodley, the director at Junction City Local Aid in Lane County, said housing instability and food insecurity are as big of a problem in rural areas as in urban areas.

behind low wages and unemployment in terms of driving the need for emergency food services.

"In the last few years, we have really increased the amount of time we have spent on housing," Koehler said. "That is because it is one of the biggest issues we hear from the people we serve."

That's Junction City, said pantry volunteer Jan Reel.

"The biggest complaint that I hear is, 'I can't afford an apartment. If I did, I couldn't pay anything else,'" Reel said.

According to Junction City Local Aid's data, the organization has seen a steady increase in those seeking help at the pantry since 2012. This past year, the pantry served 8,745 people — an increase of more than 1,500 compared with five years ago. Trips through the pantry have increased an average of 518 a month, to 3,043 last year.

The driving factor, Rodley said, is "increased housing instability."

For Jim and his wife, just as for Burr, getting food at the pantry is offsetting the cost of fixed expenses, such as a mobile home or motorhome and medical bills.

Jim, 78, lives with his wife and their 18-year-old cat, Guy, in a 40-foot National Coach motor home. He has two doctorates, he said, and has written three books.

"It's cheaper than housing," Jim said of the motor home, adding that he has had serious medical issues, including kidney failure.

Jim and his wife survive on a combined $2,000 a month in Social Security, plus $50 a month in royalties from his books. They stay at the local Guaranty RV Park and owe the company $3,000 for repairs, which translates into monthly payments of $500 or more, Jim said.

"Oregon is an expensive state for the low income," Jim said, noting that he's traveled to 48 states. Oregon Food Bank and Junction City Local Aid are "phenomenal," he said. Their help saves his household $200 to $250 a month.

"It's a constant balancing act," Jim said.

Burr smiled as she spoke of waking up on Valentine's Day, the day Street Roots visited Junction City Local Aid, to a card her husband made by hand.

"He really wanted to send me flowers and stuff, but it just wasn't in the budget," she said. "But this was just as good."

Burr, 64, who has lived in the area since 1987, said she was an assistant manager at Goodwill before a car accident changed her life. Burr said she is disabled, and her husband is "on oxygen, so he's really disabled."

For 12 years, the couple have rented a space at Tivoli Mobile Home Park, which was purchased by St. Vincent de Paul of Lane County in 2016.

"They really cleaned it up," Burr said. They also discontinued the previous owner's practice of raising rents every year by the same amount as Social Security cost-of-living increases, Burr said.

Her household lives on $1,200 a month from their two Social Security incomes, she said, and the couple pay $300 per month for food – on top of what they get from the food pantry.

"Sometimes people turn their nose up at (food pantries)," Burr said. "For the most part they don't do that anymore, especially since Country Coach went out of business."

Country Coach, a high-end RV manufacturer, shuttered its Junction City operations in 2009, putting nearly 500

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