

Housing Rural Oregon

Simulating poverty

Teachers get schooled on living with poverty and homelessness – experiences many of their students face every day

BY EMILY GREEN
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Imagine you're a single mother trying to support two school-aged children on low wages earned working two jobs. You've just paid your car insurance and utility bills, when the transmission on your 1997 sedan gives out, and with it goes your only means of transportation to your graveyard shift cleaning offices. Public transportation in your neighborhood doesn't run at night.

With no money for repairs, you miss work, you get fired, you don't make rent, and the downward spiral begins. You spend the last of your cash taking the bus to job interviews and social-service agencies, looking for any way to keep a roof over your kids' heads. Just when you think things can't possibly get worse, your teenage daughter tells you she's pregnant.

For those who grew up in poverty, going through the motions of a simulation such as this can be triggering, said Steve Roe. He owns and manages a car dealership in Grants Pass and conducts these simulations across Oregon, free of charge. He said it's important for people who, like himself, have never lived in severe poverty, to have the powerful experience the simulation affords.

It was after going through one himself two years ago at a Ford Family Foundation retreat in Bend that Roe decided he wanted to become a facilitator.

He flew to St. Louis, Mo., for a two-day training and bought a \$2,150 kit from the Missouri Association for Community Action. Since then, he has taken groups, typically of 100 or more, through the simulation in various towns across Oregon, paying for his own travel, room and board along the way.

A district in poverty

When Lisa DeSalvio, a program director at Coos Bay School District, experienced a poverty simulation at The Mill Casino in North Bend, it immediately struck her as something that would be beneficial to educators working in her district.

In last week's edition of Street Roots, we reported on how generational poverty following an economic collapse in the 1980s has fed an increasingly severe housing crisis in Coos County.

Up and down the Oregon Coast, each

community is struggling with housing and poverty issues of its own, where demand for housing outweighs supply and costs outpace incomes. A side effect is that many children are either experiencing homelessness, or their parents are heavily rent burdened.

In Coos County, 30 percent of children live in poverty and nearly half qualify for free or reduced lunch, according Children First for Oregon's 2017 County Data Book.

The Coos Bay School District has been hit particularly hard. As of April, 390 of the 3,100 children in the district had experienced homelessness this school year, said Melinda Torres, who works as both the ARK Program manager and the homeless liaison and for the district.

Torres fulfills her two roles – both aimed at serving impoverished families – out of the same office located at Harding Learning Center, an alternative high school where 70 percent of the student body is considered homeless.

It's also where the ARK Program offers a food pantry, free clothing closet with most child and teen sizes, hygiene items and other essentials that have been collected as donations and are provided to struggling families with kids enrolled in the district.

Torres said the majority of her homeless students are either couch surfing or doubled up in a relative or friend's home after their family lost their own. She said many students falling into the homeless category are living in substandard housing, such as a camper or RV, and others are living in motels.

Thankfully, she said, she doesn't currently have any families camping in tents, but that situation typically arises in the summer.

"I remember one family had a 4-year-old and a 1-year-old, and I'm just calling everywhere, because I am like you have to be somewhere before winter comes. I cannot handle you being in that tent with those babies," she said. "And that's what really kills me."

Until Coos Cares' Harmony House opened in December, there was no homeless shelter for families in the entire county. However, Harmony House only has space for two families and is running a wait list.

There's also no shelter for unaccompanied youths in Coos County – or anywhere else along the coast.

In Lincoln County, where 1 in 8 students are homeless, the school district typically has one or two students who are bused to school from the nearest homeless youth shelters, in Salem and Corvallis – at least an hour each way. If the kids can't find people who will house them locally, it's the only way to prevent them from falling behind academically, explained Katey Townsend, the homeless liaison for Lincoln County School District.

During the 2016-17 school year, 215 homeless students in Lincoln County School District were unsheltered – finding refuge in campers, tents, barns and storage units, said Townsend. That same year, 84 stayed in shelters and motels, and nearly 500 found shelter in the homes of family or friends.

Townsend said the numbers are up from when she moved back to Newport to work for the school district in 2010. Back then, there were about 400 homeless youths across the entire county. Two years ago, the number peaked at close to 1,000. While the increase may be partially due to better tracking, she said, "the problem has definitely gotten worse."

With no youth shelters, homeless youths living on Oregon's coast can often find themselves in less-than-ideal living situations, such as staying with a coworker they recently met at a new job or with a relative who has a substance abuse issues.

"I remember some of them last year,



ILLUSTRATION BY ENRIQUE RAMOS LOPEZ/ISTOCK



About this series

This article is part of Street Roots' Housing Rural Oregon series. This segment of the series examines housing and homeless issues along Oregon's coast. Read previous articles from the series at news.streetroots.org.

were staying with random people, and there was nothing I could do about it besides give them a tent," Torres said.

Barbara Green, education assistant at the Coos Bay School District's ARK Program, added, "It happened this year for a couple kids. They just moved here and don't have anywhere to stay, so they ask their classmates, 'Hey, can I stay with you, would your parents be OK with it?'"

In the two years she has been with the district, Torres said unaccompanied teenagers have made up a large part of her caseload. She said in some cases, they moved to the coast with a significant other who has family in the area, and then a breakup leaves them homeless. Many are simply at odds with their family.

Green said families and youth are often drawn to Coos Bay because they have "an awesome childhood memory" of the place and decided to move there without a solid plan for housing or work.

"That is always a major one," said Torres, "for why families move here. Or they were promised a job. And then that didn't go through. We hear that all the time."

Erin Skaar, director of Community Action Resource Enterprises in Tillamook County, said she can name three families in her area who have a teenager who is not their own living with them right now.

"I think that this goes back to that we have a friendly, small community, where we

have a lot of amazingly wonderful, loving households that will allow those youths to stay for a window of time," Skaar said.

For homeless students, accessing the internet or finding a quiet place to do homework can be barriers to succeeding in school. Objectives like finding shelter and acquiring money can become priorities, while schoolwork and grades fall to the wayside.

It can be tough on teachers, too. In both Lincoln County and Coos Bay school districts, it's likely a teacher will have multiple homeless students in his or her classroom.

"Sometimes, it's probably hard when juggling 30 students, and maybe one of the homeless students is sleeping that morning, in their class," said Townsend. "That can be frustrating, but I think when a teacher learns the underlying issue of what's going on – they didn't have stable housing or they stayed up half the night because they were in a tent and it was raining outside, they really switch into figuring out how to support the student."

Teachers can point their students to their school's homeless liaison and other resources for students who are struggling with housing or food insecurity.

In Coos Bay, the ARK program offers a computer lab, along with transportation

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Coastal Crossroads

Part II Coos County

Oregon's coastal communities are struggling with a housing crisis all their own – one that's gotten worse every year following the Great Recession. Short-term vacation rentals, generational poverty, an increasingly visible wealth divide and aging populations have all pushed coastal communities to an irrevocable reckoning. For these communities to have a viable future, something has to change, but what?

"I felt like more people within our district, who have contact with kids, need to understand that this is not their fault. How can we build more empathy and understanding of these children who are homeless, in foster care, almost homeless?"

MELINDA TORRES
ARK PROGRAM MANAGER AND HOMELESS LIAISON
FOR THE COOS BAY SCHOOL DISTRICT



PHOTOS BY EMILY GREEN

Melinda Torres (above) goes through supplies at Coos Bay ARK Program, which provides clothing, food and other supplies to housing insecure families with children in the Coos Bay School District. In Coos County, 30 percent of children live in poverty and nearly half qualify for free or reduced lunch, according Children First for Oregon's 2017 County Data Book. Hygiene kits (at right) funded by the Cow Creek Umpqua Indian Foundation, are ready for students. This past winter, Torres said her program distributed 120 such kits.

