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AND YAMHILL COUNTY

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# Neighbors

## County's affluence hides social service needs

■ Washington County human services groups are working to raise residents' awareness of the poor, the elderly and the homeless in the area

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**H**ILLSBORO — Let's play word association, and the words are "Washington County." Do you picture high-tech plants, Street of Dreams houses and college-educated professionals? Or do you see the unemployed, the homeless and teens who have dropped out?

Both answers are right.

Washington County has one of the state's highest per capita incomes, but nearly 30 percent of the population is considered economically disadvantaged and about 15 percent is poor by federal standards.

The county has some of the metropolitan area's most expensive new houses, but homelessness is a growing problem.

Its residents have reached some of the highest educational levels, but 900 kids drop out of schools in the county each

year.

Washington County, says a coalition of 40 social service professionals, has a number of pressing needs despite its popular image of affluence.

To educate more community groups and potential volunteers about what people in Washington County need, the group has produced a report called "Human Services Make Sense."

The report not only outlines the problems, but also gives residents ideas about what steps to take to meet the needs, said Jim Long, chairman of the Human Services Coalition, the group that produced the study.

And, in case anyone has doubts about public services, the report also lists the reasons that everyone should be concerned about assisting the young, the old, the addicted, the jobless, the homeless and those with other needs.

The section on housing, for instance, provides basic information for the county of 343,000 residents:

- Those who have trouble paying for housing include people on fixed incomes and those in low-paying or entry-level jobs.

- More than 18,000 low-income households have rents considered unafford-

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Community Children and Youth Services Commission

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ble by federal and state standards. Nearly 10,000 households earn less than half the area's median income. For that reason, those persons are especially at risk of becoming homeless.

- Of the people eligible to receive housing assistance in the county, fewer than one in six is actually served by current programs.

The report suggests several ways to solve housing problems. These include more affordable rentals as well as houses priced for first-time buyers. Other solutions include access to jobs with wages large enough to support families and short-term rental assistance to avoid evictions and foreclosures.

Another recommendation is reducing tenant application fees and housing deposits required by most landlords.

If housing problems are ignored, the report says, the county will have growing communities of people who are one paycheck away from losing their homes. It also is likely to see the numbers of homeless increase, with an accompanying demand for tax dollars to provide emergency shelters and health care.

Inadequate housing may also mean a reduced workforce or workers that must commute from neighboring commu-

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# **Social need:**

## Report offers housing ideas

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nities. The commuters will make demands on roads and public transportation.

The report offers these ideas for solving housing problems:

- Support local public-private partnerships to create low-income rental homes.

- Preserve existing houses and apartments through public and non-profit ownership.

- Seek money to build affordable rentals, to set up rent assistance programs, to create emergency shelters and to expand home ownership opportunities.

- Provide housing counseling to prepare low-income families for home ownership.

The report is arranged by topic, including children and youth, the disabled, domestic violence, employment and training, public health and indigent health care, and transportation.

Facts, charts and possible ways to meet the needs under each topic are compressed onto one sheet, printed front and back. That format means someone interested in a specific topic can take just the appropriate sheet to study or reproduce as background information for a community group.

The Human Services Coalition is distributing copies of its report to businesses, local governments, schools, libraries and other organizations. U.S. Bank arranged to print the first 250 copies, Long said.

Coalition members also will make presentations to organizations concerned about human services, he said.

"We are concerned that people continue to believe that there are no problems in Washington County," said Diana Stotz, a coalition member and program coordinator for the county's Community Children and Youth Services Commission.

"There are good things happening," Stotz said. "But there are growing needs, too."