

Program is buoy in a sea of uncertainty

■ While their parents look for jobs and homes, children in a Washington County shelter have a safe place to go after school

by MICHELLE MANDEL
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HILLSBORO — Squeals of laughter pierce the tiny basement room as youngsters — none older than age 10 — stack blocks, race cars or lay dress-up in plastic high heels.

Kate Dudek doesn't shush them. The Jesuit volunteer, who oversees this special after-school program, would rather the children be here, yelling at the top of their lungs, than at some park or at McDonald's, waiting for a parent to pick them up.

Unfortunately, she says, that's where many of these children would be under normal circumstances. Their homeless parents can't afford child care.



A Season of Sharing

The Oregonian is focusing on many of Oregon's most vulnerable children as part of the newspaper's annual Season of Sharing drive. The paper will share those stories usually on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays until the New Year. A coupon appears on Page B3 for those who want to donate to the charities involved in the drive.

But during the five weeks their parents live here, in Washington County's only family shelter, the children can participate in the free after-school program — and perhaps experience a sense of security they haven't had in years, says shelter coordinator Carol Surrency. "If you're under a great deal of stress, it's

hard to focus on playing a game with your children," says Surrency, sitting in the shelter at 210 S.E. 12th St. in Hillsboro. "We give the children attention — sometimes a lot of focused attention — that they might not get otherwise."

The Washington County effort addresses two of the major problems vexing low-income and working-poor families nationwide: finding affordable, quality child care and arranging for adult supervision after school.

The after-school program, aimed at children ages 6 to 12, offers games, books and other activities to keep their young brains busy. Donated toys clutter the small playroom, but all field trips — to places like the zoo, the movies or OMSI — must be paid for by cash donations.

This day a 6-year-old boy rings up a make-believe order on a toy cash register, while a 7-year-old boy dumps a bucket of race cars on the ground, yelling out to the other children,

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STEPHANIE YAO/The Oregonian

Carina Lopez, 3, (center) plays with volunteer Kate Dudek and Kathryn DeLay, 3, in Washington County's only family shelter, which also offers after-school care. Parents say the program makes their shelter stay easier.

Shelter: Staff meets physical, other needs

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"DO NOT HOG THEM!"

Later, Dudek reads them a Christmas story.

"Some of the kids are really shy or scared the first week," says Dudek, who's with the Portland-based Jesuit Volunteer Corps and began her one-year stint at the shelter in August. "But after a while, they settle down, and their self-confidence increases. And they start having fun."

Opened in 1975, the shelter accommodates up to five two-parent households and their children. "We address whatever needs they have," Surrency says, "and try to help them work on their housing or jobs or counseling."

The children, she says, can suffer from malnutrition and poor hygiene, along with unattended medical and dental needs. In addition, they often have behavioral programs, ranging from hyperactivity to listlessness, that shelter staff and volunteers face head-on, even if it means seeking outside help.

"We had one family here that had several children, and the youngest child was really acting out," says Carly Mauldin, the shelter's case manager, who meets all children coming into the shelter. "We spotted it right away, and went right to the parents, who really were trying hard to get back on track."

"They agreed to get the child counseling, and the child — who seemed to be doing better — was still in counseling when they left."

Parents spend their days seeking work or securing permanent housing — difficult assignments for people who have failed in the past and who have bad credit or maybe even arrest records, Surrency says.

One less burden

Lori Scott of Hillsboro said the program made her shelter stay a lot

easier. "I was looking for an apartment, and the shelter was helping me," says the 32-year-old mother of five. "If my children hadn't been in the program, they would have had to wait for me in the park after school."

Scott's 9-year-old daughter, Amanda, says she had "a lot of fun" in the after-school program, playing games and listening to stories. "We made things too," she says, "and had snacks."

Lack of child care only adds to the burden of homeless parents, especially if they have children under age 5 — because those children don't normally participate in the shelter's after-school program. Starting early next year, however, Washington County's Community Action Organization — which oversees the family shelter — will offer child-care vouchers for parents in shelters.

"It really bridges the gap, giving parents a better chance to get back on their feet," says Renee Bruce, CAO child and family support program manager.

The voucher program will be funded for three years.

Until then, the shelter's after-school program remains the only option for some parents. This day, they arrive about 5:30 p.m. to pick up their children — and take them upstairs to the family's sole bedroom or to the communal kitchen for dinner. None want to talk about their plight, or the program, probably because they're ashamed or scared, Surrency says.

"Some of them are having a great deal of trouble being parents right now," she says. "They have guilt, and a lot on their minds. We just hope the after-school program makes it a little bit easier for them."

"That it helps give them a second chance."

For more information about A Season of Sharing, please call 221-8535.