

## It's time to help the homeless

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More than 13,000 Oregonians -- the majority experiencing mental illness and struggling with addiction -- live on the streets, live in their cars and live in shelters.

Here in Marion and Polk counties alone, we have learned (Statesman Journal, Sept. 10) that some 2,000 people have no place to call home.

Homelessness is a national problem, exacerbated by social service systems strained to the breaking point.

In our state, the budget reductions that followed the recession of 2001 had devastating effects. The systems serving people at risk of homelessness, particularly those with mental illness and substance-abuse problems, suffered deep cuts.

Each year in Oregon, local agencies serving the homeless conduct a count of people experiencing homelessness on one night in January.

Unlike the recent "street count" conducted in Marion and Polk counties, the statewide count primarily captures the number of people seeking shelter services on a given night. While this count under-represents the scope of the tragedy, it does provide a valuable perspective on homelessness and details about the people it affects.

We have learned, for example, that single Oregonians represent 39 percent of those experiencing homelessness, while people in families make up the remaining 61 percent. Think of this: Almost two-thirds of homeless Oregonians are members of families.

There's more: Of that two-thirds who are family members, two-thirds are headed by a single parent. The typical homeless family includes a mother with two children younger than 5.

Other key findings:

Single women make up 10 percent of the homeless population.

Youths up to age 18 represented 32 percent of the homeless counted on that January night.

Extreme poverty and homelessness go hand in hand. Among the causes of homelessness: insufficient income and low-paying jobs, unaffordable housing and poor access to services.

But homelessness is disproportionately associated with mental illness and substance abuse.

In fact, among the people counted in January 2007, nearly one-quarter reported a problem with substance abuse, almost 20 percent suffered from a mental-health problem and another 9 percent struggled with both mental illness and addiction.

Our state -- indeed, our nation -- must act to stop the suffering of our homeless neighbors. It's starting to happen.

In April 2006, Gov. Ted Kulongoski issued an executive order creating an Ending

Homelessness Advisory Council. During monthly meetings, the council has worked to understand the nature of homelessness across Oregon and to craft goals and strategies to end this disrepute.

And, right here in Salem, the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency has begun to build a similar plan for Marion and Polk counties.

By the end of 2007, the Ending Homelessness Advisory Council will release its proposed strategies for ending homelessness.

One thing is clear even now: Successful outcomes by Oregon and its counties will require compassion and commitment of the people to bring an end to the tragedy of homelessness. The well-being of 13,000 Oregonians isn't the only thing at stake; the health of our communities is on the line.

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