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Forum addresses 'holes' in safety net

Faith leaders, activists hope to match people to homelessness, health care and hunger resources in Washington County

By **NANCY TOWNSLEY**
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Cindy Kirk wasn't sure what to expect when she wandered into the cavernous auditorium at Hillsboro's Sunrise Church on Sept. 26.

The Bethany resident, executive director of Greater Beaverton Love INC, a non-profit that mobilizes church members to help people in need, came to the "Times Are Tough: Become Equipped To Respond" town hall on homelessness, health care and hunger to make connections.

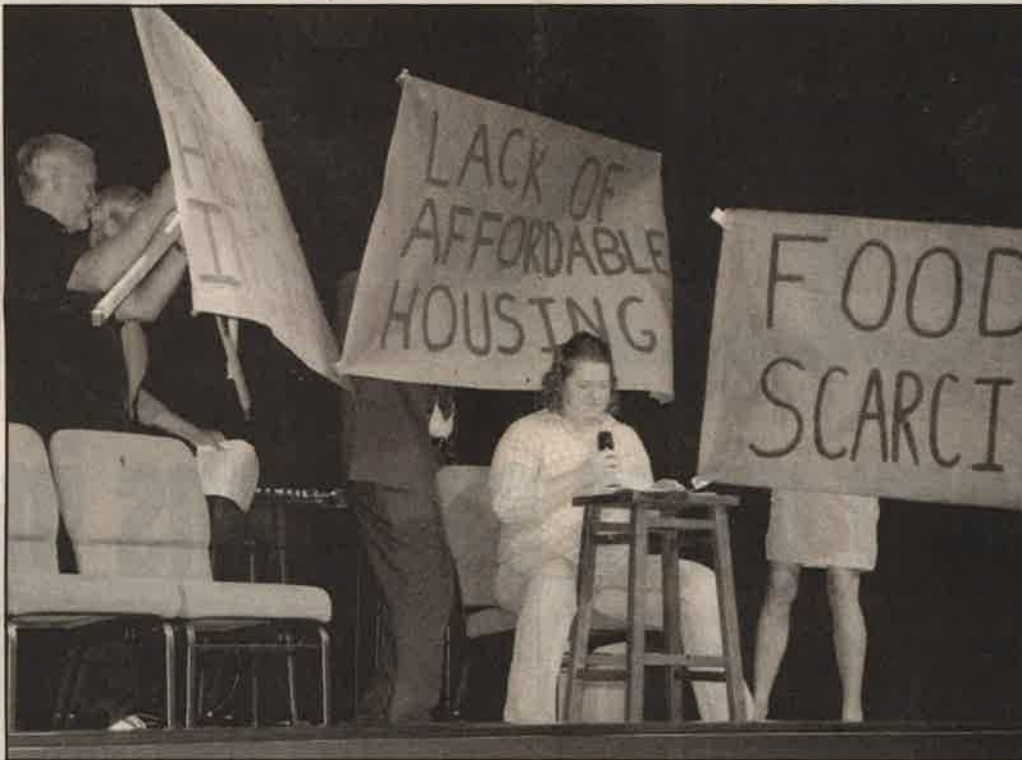
What she found was an extensive network of folks who were eager to work with her to lighten the load for 1,243 homeless people, 27,720 hungry individuals and 73,000 residents without health care insurance across the county.

"We're essentially a clearinghouse, and this is a good place to spread the word," Kirk said before the morning-long forum started. She left a lucrative job as a national accounts manager for a book publisher seven years ago to work with 28 Beaverton-area churches affiliated with Love INC.

"Reconciling my faith with how I live my life every day was important to me," said Kirk, a mother of two grown children. "Now I kind of have everything on the same page."

Between 150 and 200 folks from Beaverton, Hillsboro, Forest Grove, Cornelius, Tigard and Tualatin spent four hours Sept. 26 identifying holes in the county's safety net that many needy residents are falling through as unemployment and poverty rise. They heard from county experts in each "H" area as the day's activities got under way.

"What we're about today is



Photos submitted by ERIC CANON

talking about what we can do collectively to improve the lives of those in Washington County who are hurting," said Martha Moyer, a Bethany-area resident and a founding member of the Washington County Interfaith Committee on Homelessness.

"We not only have a homelessness problem — we have a problem of food security and lack of health care," added Moyer, who served as emcee for the town hall.

Hungry and sick

Eric Canon of Forest Grove, chairman of the committee on homelessness, added that those most deeply affected by poverty — a situation made worse by the shaky economy — can't afford to wait.

"People are sharing housing or without housing. They're hungry, and they're sick," said Canon, 62, who spearheaded the creation of the ICH three years ago. "But today will mean nothing if it doesn't continue. We need to grow this effort so it does some good.

"This process is a start. If it

dies here, we've missed that opportunity."

Canon, and others who've beat a drum for affordable housing as the recession has deepened in recent months, have made strides to involve a greater number of churches — including more conservative and evangelical congregations such as Sunrise — in the effort to help the homeless.

At the event, they cast their net even wider to include the sister issues of hunger and affordable health care. Kevin Palau of the Beaverton-based Luis Palau Evangelistic Association pleaded for divine guidance when he gave the morning prayer.

Throughout the morning, a dozen organizations tried to catch the attention of forum-goers with colorful displays in the Sunrise lobby.

Lindsey Coppinger, chairwoman of Beaverton Compassion Connect, said she sensed "a compelling need to help 'the least of these' as leaders and individuals."

Representing Compassion Beaverton Clinic, Coppinger

said that "God has called on us as the faith-based to gather up our resources and be bold.

"Ask your dentist: 'There's a clinic coming — would you be willing to volunteer?'" she said. "Ask your doctor, 'Can you come to our school?'"

Churches, Coppinger added, "are coming together not as Lutherans and Baptists but as people who want to help our neighbor."

When the crowd divided itself into four geographically-based breakout sessions, hands went up in the smaller forums. Some spoke of free medical check-ups. Some offered news of hot meals. Some told of extra beds for those without.

The town hall turned out to be just what organizers intended: a widely ecumenical gathering of church and community leaders from across the county, determined to focus on individual needs above religious dogma or politics.

Beaverton city councilors Betty Bode and Cathy Stanton were there, as well as state Rep. Chuck Riley, a Democrat representing Oregon's 29th dis-

OPENING PLAY — Saturday's town hall in Hillsboro started with a modern version of "The Good Samaritan," staged to illustrate the dire effects housing insecurity, food scarcity and lack of health care have on the poor in Washington County.

trict, which stretches from Hillsboro to Gales Creek.

Ramsay Weit, an ICH member and executive director of the Community Housing Fund, which helps nonprofits build affordable housing in the county, indicated that the cornucopia of clergy was a triumph.

"As a former community organizer, I found that it was always the faith communities that had the power," said Weit, whose organization is based in Beaverton. "This is a human, one-on-one ministry."

He said 46 percent of county residents spend more than 30 percent of their monthly budgets on housing costs. Because the rent or mortgage payment takes precedence, Weit added, some folks skimp on food or health care.

And, he said, housing instability often leads to other problems. "If you don't have a place to sleep at night, you're not going to keep a job, which means you can't afford to feed your family," he said.

Vicki Pedraza, manager of the Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Clinic in Beaverton, said more than 100,000 people in Washington County lack health insurance. Although their services aren't free, the Virginia Garcia clinics in Cornelius, Hillsboro and Beaverton see 12,000 low-income patients a year.

She reminded her breakout group to reach out to those in poverty without judgment. "We need to be careful and compassionate and not make assumptions about why people are in the positions they're in," Pedraza said.