

Family shelter in demand, short on cash

■ **The Community Action Organization finds it hard to cope with more people as the agency's resources dwindle**

By **JANET GOETZE**
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HILLSBORO — When Steve and Loretta Hills were in a bind a few weeks ago — no job, no home, not enough money for rent — they were glad the Washington County Community Action Organization was around to help them.

The organization, which coordinates many of the county's human services programs, may have to help fewer people this year. Although needs are growing, the money to meet them isn't keeping up, a group of service providers said last week.

They made that point with the agreement of United Way of the Columbia-Willamette, which presented its annual check to the community action organization.

Because of the decline in private

contributions throughout the region, United Way's \$94,000 check to the private, nonprofit organization was \$8,000 less than last year, said Carol Fenstermacher, United Way communications director.

Dian Sharma, Washington County's director of Health and Human Services, called community action the county's "primary safety net."

Sharma's department contracts with the organization to deliver services. County officials say that is the most efficient way to channel public dollars into services that also are supported by private sources.

However, if federal, state or other resources drop off, the county has no policy to make up the money out of its general fund for programs that counties aren't required to provide.

Nevertheless, in recent years the county has put some of its reserve money into community action's housing programs. For the 1993-94 fiscal year, that will be \$50,000 for the homeless shelter and a refuge for women and children fleeing domestic violence.

Whatever the struggle for funding, Steve and Loretta Hills are glad community action and its family shelter had room for them nearly three weeks ago.

Steve Hills, 39, worked for Tektronix for eight years before taking a job with an electronics company in Southern California, where his family lived in Fountain Valley. His wife, Loretta Hills, 38, was an administrative assistant for another company.

Steve Hills worked for the California company for eight years, rising to a management position with 110 employees in his section.

Then the company cut back. Steve Hills' job was eliminated.

The couple, with sons Josh, 12, and Andrew, 11, were paying \$1,125 a month rent for a three-bedroom apartment. Steve Hills' unemployment check and Loretta Hills' take-home pay barely covered that and the utilities.

Job prospects were dim in the declining California economy. "We decided to come back home," Loretta Hills said.

They packed up a van and the car and headed north. Along the way, the car engine died with a bang. Repairs took a large chunk of their savings.

They stayed with friends near Hillsboro until the landlord complained. They tried to find space in a park to live in a camper. But all the spaces were full.

With no other prospects, the Hills went to community action's emergency shelter. They were in luck, for a change.

After two weeks at the shelter, Steve Hills plans to enter a business training program. The couple have applied for assisted housing until they get back on their feet.

"We've run into some hard luck," Steve Hills said. He added optimistically, "We just need a change in luck to get back on our feet."

Michael Vigil, who manages the family shelter, said his staff has worked with 8,000 people who needed new luck in the past year.

"The problem is growing and the resources are dwindling," he said.