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Churches join crusade to end homelessness in Washington County

By [Jill Rehkopf Smith](#), [The Oregonian](#)

September 23, 2009, 6:00PM

HILLSBORO -- Drawn by the misery on their home turf, more of Washington County's conservative megachurches are stepping forward to help.

Some of these massive churches that typically 1,000 attendees or more will even brave a little theological discomfort to participate in Saturday's faith forum in Hillsboro on hunger, homelessness and healthcare.

Eric Canon, chair of the Washington County Interfaith Committee on Homelessness, which is sponsoring the forum, welcomes all newcomers: "The churches are the safety net right now. The social service agencies are overwhelmed. There's not nearly enough resources out there to meet the need."

More than 100 people from churches, nonprofits and governments will attend the "Times are Tough: Become Equipped to Respond" forum.

Interfaith forum on homelessness

- **What:** "Times Are Tough: Become Equipped to Respond," a faith forum on Hunger, Homelessness and Health in Washington County
- **When:** 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Saturday
- **Where:** Sunrise Church, 6701 NE Campus Way in Hillsboro.
- **Info:** www.ahomeoftheirown.com or call Eric Canon at 503-357-3282
They will try to coordinate a network of shelters, food pantries and other emergency services, with an eye to long-term solutions as well.

A few megachurches, such as Sunrise in Hillsboro, have been aggressively tackling local needs. In addition to hosting the forum, Sunrise runs a severe-weather shelter and hosted Project Homeless Connect last January. It is now working with the city of Hillsboro for permits to certify its kitchen and keep its shelter open from December through February -- the county's first such shelter for single people.

Too often, said Mike McDonald, pastor of missions at Solid Rock church in Tigard, "churches feel they need to go down to Burnside to be a part of solving some problem."

The Cup of Joy homeless ministry at Sunset Presbyterian, a conservative Cedar Mill megachurch, serves a wonderful monthly meal -- to people from a program based in Southeast Portland.

One of the most socially active evangelical organizations, the Luis Palau Association, recently refocused on Washington County after seeing the light -- or at least the raw statistics -- on the needs here.

"I was totally unaware that there are more than 1,100 homeless students in the Beaverton School District. I had no idea," said Kevin Palau, executive vice president of the association created by his evangelist father.

Since 2001, the Palau Association has sparked tens of thousands of church volunteers to help Portland Public Schools and even handed the City of Portland a \$100,000 check from the churches in February to address homelessness and school dropouts.

But Palau, who attended Beaverton schools with his brothers, said he recently recognized the obvious: "Here we are for 30-plus years based not in Portland, frankly, but in Beaverton. We're really a Washington County family. Why not do more here?"

Palau helped arrange a "Community Care Day" at Five Oaks Middle School last month, where roughly 100 church volunteers helped with painting, weeding and more.

School district spokesperson Maureen Wheeler said Palau approached district officials about organizing an official Community Care Day for all the district's schools in 2010. No official action has been taken, she said.

The Palau organization also aims to raise \$50,000 from Beaverton churches this school year to help homeless students, similar to the Portland donation.

And Palau is helping to coordinate a free medical and dental clinic on Oct. 10 at Barnes Elementary School in Beaverton. He expects at least 400 volunteers from 20 churches.

"That's a first," Palau said. "We've really never seen some of the larger Beaverton churches formally working together on something like this."

In 2010, Palau said, Washington County churches aim to provide four such clinics a year. They will be added to a list of services at Saturday's forum, where organizers will divide the county into four districts, each represented by a pastor, a "frontline" social-service worker and a lay person.

Four breakout groups will identify needs within each district's boundaries and will compile a master list of services. Right now, "it's just a patchwork. There's no central source of information," Canon said.

A master list could also highlight the gaps, Canon said: "There are so many holes in the safety net. Anything we do will be a step in the right direction."

Palau was impressed with the three-year-old interfaith committee's efforts and agreed to help connect it with more of the county's evangelicals. The committee has raised thousands of dollars for homeless families and helped organize a network of severe-weather shelters.

Palau acknowledged that many conservative evangelicals hesitate to join anything described as "interfaith," primarily because they believe Jesus (Christianity) is the only way to heaven. Progressive churches, such as Canon's Forest Grove United Church of Christ, tend to be more open to other faiths.

And because of their concern about eternal life, evangelicals sometimes focus more on people's souls than their earthly needs, said Debbie Stewart of Sunset Presbyterian.

Stewart knows such an approach alienates some people, who think, "All you want to do is convert me to Jesus, when what I really need is some dry clothes and a warm meal and somebody to be my friend."

She also knows conservative and progressive churches often disagree theologically over many things, including salvation, abortion and homosexuality. But compassion for those in need is more important, she said.

Canon agrees: "We don't all believe the same thing. And no two people do. So let's come together on what we do agree about."

-- Jill Rehkopf Smith