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COMMUNITY NEWS

Schools offer hope to homeless students

Districts scramble to offer services as the number of needy children climbs

By **MELISSA NAVAS**
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Washington County school leaders had an inkling last spring that the shaky economy would translate into unprecedented numbers of homeless students.

With three months left in the 2009-10 school year, their predictions are coming true.

Most school districts in the county are either on pace to surpass last year's homeless counts, or they already have.

Beaverton has 96 more homeless students than the 1,114 the district had at the end of last year.

Hillsboro's tally is 112 students shy of its 403 mark for 2008-09 and is expected to grow.

A year ago, staff identified four or five students weekly as homeless, said Christie Petersen, who coordinates Hillsboro's homeless programs. This year, it's three or four per day.

Homeless students are not just those living on the streets. When the economy falters and parents lose their jobs

or homes, children may wind up living with friends or family and traveling farther to get to their home schools. The upheaval can cause grades to slip as students become distracted by worrying about where they'll eat or sleep. Schools and others are trying to address that need by providing help, which might range from tutoring to a \$30 coat.

"It's fast and furious and ongoing," Petersen said of the growing numbers of homeless students.

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Getting help

- Families needing **emergency shelter** can call 503-640-3263 to place their name on the waiting list for Washington County's three homeless shelters.
- **Community Action**, a Hillsboro organization, offers emergency rental assistance. Reach them at 503-615-0770.
- The **2-1-1 call center** serving the Portland area is a clearinghouse for information on food banks, clothing closets, shelters and rent and utility assistance; health insurance programs, Medicaid and Medicare, community health clinics, mental health crisis services, and drug and alcohol intervention; job training; and child care, after-school programs and other family resources. Families can also call 503-222-5555 or visit www.211info.org.

Homeless: Increase in need mirrors county trend

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Districts say they are getting better about identifying youths who lack permanent homes and providing better training to staff about resources and services available to those students and their families.

"What we're seeing is that there are more people who need basic needs met," said Sheryl Lindenberg, a counselor at William Walker Elementary School in Beaverton.

Students qualify for homeless services if they live in unstable home environments—for example, if they are "doubled up" and living in a home with relatives or friends, or if they live in a motel, tent, garage or trailer without running water or electricity.

Most of the growth in homeless students in the past year was due to doubling up; three-quarters of the state's homeless students lived in a "doubled up" household.

When students' lives are

More homeless students

Most Washington County school districts have surpassed the number of homeless students they had at this time last year.

	March 2010*	March 2009	Total for 08-09	Enrollment
Beaverton	1,210	835	1,114	38,090
Hillsboro	291	180	403	27,375
Tigard-Tualatin	75	112	170	12,467
Forest Grove	110	86	104	5,992
Sherwood	36	17	35	4,761
Banks	0	4	4	1,194
Gaston	14	13	13	478

* Figures as of March 15

Source: School districts and Oregon Department of Education

turned upside down, their grades may suffer or they may lose focus at school, said Jenn Winqvist, a counselor at Aloha High School.

Several years ago, Winqvist said, she and other teachers noticed "how some kids are shaking with hunger, going through the trash, asking for granola bars or extra food, or taking the leftovers from our preschool program. We were just so heartbroken."

The school created a food pantry and clothes closet that students could use immediately, with shoes donated by Nike and Columbia Sportswear as well as canned food and racks of coats and clothes.

The help means a lot to a student's well being, Petersen said. Several homeless Hillsboro se-

niors will be graduating with honors in June, she said.

Petersen remembered the gratitude of one girl who received a coat from a local church during the holidays. In a thank you note, the student shared her grades.

It was her way of saying, "I'm a normal kid. Thank you for keeping my dignity. I want you to know I'm a good kid, I'm doing well," Petersen said.

The increase in homeless students mirrors a countywide trend, Washington County officials said.

Annette Evans, county homeless program coordinator, said the county may not be able to help everyone find housing, but assisting with food or clothing frees up money for rent or mort-

gage payments.

At the end of January, 64 families were on a waiting list for emergency shelter in the 17 county units available, Evans said.

"Shelter is so scarce in Washington County, and the waiting lists are usually long," said Karen Dalbey, a special programs coordinator in the Sherwood School District.

Agencies in Washington County say they are banding together, sharing information and connecting those in need with community groups, such as local churches, who can help families.

Evans said that navigating public assistance is "a whole new experience for a great number of homeless persons that we have in our community."

"For some families, it's very humbling to have to go and ask or to admit that they no longer are the American dream where they own a home and have a job," Evans said.

The heart of what homeless liaisons do comes down to that "outpouring of care and concern," Petersen said.

"I think there's always hope," Petersen said she tells students. "And you can succeed. You have gifts and talents and abilities and people are behind you."

Melissa Navas: 503-294-5959;
melissanavas@neus.oregonian.com