

THE OREGONIAN, TUESDAY, AUGUST 6, 1996

Community Action talks on poverty provide insight

■ The agency hopes the discussions will put problems of the poor back into the local and national community's awareness

By GILLIAN GAYNAIR
of The Oregonian staff

A recent dialogue sponsored by the Community Action Organization of Washington County didn't teach the agency anything particularly new about how poverty of residents here. But it did learn some fresh strategies to help improve quality of life for the poor.

Those proposed remedies, along with the most compelling issues that came out of the three-week discussion, will be addressed at a September conference of the National Association of Community Action Agencies. Findings from other community talks will be discussed, as will nationwide trends regarding poverty.

Jerralynn Ness hopes the meeting will cause a renewed commitment to helping the poor.

"We feel the issue of poverty has slipped from the national agenda," said Ness, executive director of the county's Community Action Organization. "The intent of the conference is to develop at the national level a strategy that will give support to the efforts people want to carry out at the local level. And to influence the policy-makers."

Those decision-makers will learn that finding safe, affordable housing is the No. 1 concern among many of the 40,000 poor families in Washington County.

"This growth boom Washington County is going under is great in a lot of respects," said Carren Woods, development director of Community Action. "But at the same time, being able to have affordable housing and preserving what's already out there is really difficult."

The housing situation has been critical for the past five years. Even more, the poor say well-paying jobs are tough to come by, and wages aren't keeping up with housing costs.

Those factors, along with the "fed-

eral government backing out of federal programs it once supported," has resulted in more homeless families, Ness said.

"And once a family becomes homeless, it costs about \$1,500 to get them back into a house," she said. "With the people we're working with, that's a phenomenal amount of money."

But Ness remains optimistic.

Community Action will take the suggestions from the 110 people who participated in the four local dialogues and fold them into their strategic plan for addressing poverty in Washington County.

Community talks and focus groups also will continue in the coming months.

"We believe if we can continue to engage people and bring them along to hear their views that we really can have an impact," said Ness, who added that change can't come about through the Community Action Organization alone.

"We really do need to work with all sectors of the local community and at the statewide and national levels."

Affordable housing, better jobs are among group's suggestions

The Community Action Organization invited residents of Washington County to four meetings to talk about poverty and share ideas on how to combat it. About 110 people participated. The group determined the following to be the six most important issues and offered some suggestions for change:

- More safe, affordable housing: To achieve this goal, increase housing development, implement incentives for developers, decrease rent and move-in costs.
- Meeting the basic needs of more people: To achieve this goal, increase services and access, provide Canadian/European-style programs such as national health insurance.
- More full-time jobs with good pay and benefits: To achieve this

goal, create local public-private partnerships, increase minimum wage, encourage profit sharing with employees.

■ Help more families solve problems effectively and without violence: To achieve this goal, develop family and community education, support and prevention programs, provide better access to drug and alcohol programs.

■ More people need basic reading, math and communication skills: For this goal, educate professionals to understand and respect all cultures, train teachers better.

■ Better quality, affordable child care and other support for working adults: Create public-private partnerships, provide child care subsidies and sliding fee scales.