

County's homeless have a shelter from the storm

"United Way dollars are at work in Washington County."

That was the message delivered last week at a gathering of people who are concerned about delivering services to the county's poor, hungry, unemployed, homeless. The message was carried from United Way's Portland office by Diana Stotz, program manager of the Washington County Community Children and Youth Services Commission.

And one of Washington County's excellent examples of the way United Way supports those in need is the Washington County Community Action Organization (WCCAO), which received \$94,000 this year from United Way.

"United Way donors trust us to invest their contributions in the best possible way," Stotz said. "WCCAO is a shining example of how United Way dollars are efficiently invested. The programs can help everyone from elderly women to children who live right down your street."

WCCAO attempts to remove the barriers to survival, according to Dian Sharma, director of the county's Department of Health and Human Services. Noting there are 38,000 families living in poverty in this county, Sharma said WCCAO's goal — its purpose for existence — is to offer a hand up, not a hand out.

"WCCAO is the county's primary safety net," Sharma said, "providing services for citizens in need who otherwise would truly have nowhere else to turn."

A sense of self-respect and integrity is brought to families served by WCCAO, Sharma said, and their wholeness is preserved. WCCAO has been doing this job for more than 28 years, since 1965. From her point of view, Sharma said, WCCAO works to remove barriers to self-sufficiency and fosters individual responsibility.

The ultimate goal is for its clients to break out of poverty.

Last week's gathering of community



WCCAO's stone shelter in Hillsboro stands solid for its part in alleviating the problems of homelessness.

less shelter in Hillsboro. The shelter is managed by Michael Vigil, who said he and his staff had served 5,000 people last year, including 1,500 children.

But staff at the shelter, too small for the need, turn away 12-14 people for every one they serve, according to Vigil.

The goal of the shelter is to take families in crisis and stabilize them, offering the basic necessities of food and shelter as well as case management services. Efforts are made during each family's three-week stay at the shelter to obtain permanent housing, employment and assist with any medical conditions.

A children's program at the shelter focuses on helping children in crisis learn how to become children instead of bearing the responsibility of shouldering their parents' instability. A family volunteer provides a morning

program for pre-school children and an afternoon program for those enrolled in school.

"We also try to work with parents to help them develop their parenting skills and self-esteem," Vigil said. "When you've been homeless for awhile, your self-image hits the floor."

Noted as one of the more frustrating things faced by Vigil and his staff and clients is the fact that affordable housing in the county is very limited. Limited-income people are being asked to spend up to 75 percent of their income on housing, he said.

A program of transitional housing, therefore, was begun by WCCAO. Its purpose is to remove the barrier of housing and allow each family to work on its other needs. As a result, 80 percent of families using transitional housing finally obtain permanent housing, while 40 percent of those using the

shelter finally obtain permanent housing.

As a result of the lack of affordable housing in the county, WCCAO's requests for use of the homeless shelter and transitional units have increased 350 percent in the past five years, according to Diane Hess, manager of housing advocacy for WCCAO.

Just beginning its third year of working on the affordable housing problem in Washington County, with United Way's assistance, WCCAO has a task force trying to develop a plan with public and private interests working together. The plan is to bring a solution to a growing problem in a county which is adding population faster than the state's other counties but which also has some of the state's most expensive housing. A written report from the task force is due later this month.

Adding to the problem is a surge in low-wage jobs. Hess said, causing

those workers to commute to certain areas of Portland where housing is more affordable.

"This is a crisis in housing," Hess said. "We at WCCAO believe that the county really needs to be an economically diverse community, with people of different economic strata living together in the community."

Another problem with a solution offered by WCCAO is that of hunger and future plans have WCCAO's county-based Tualatin Valley Food Center (TVFC) joining with the Portland-based Oregon Food Bank to expand its services and become more efficient.

"The Tualatin Valley Food Center is one of the most efficient that we have in our statewide network," said Steve Randolph of the Oregon Food Bank. "And it makes sense to do some consolidation between the efforts of Oregon Food Bank and TVFC."

At the present time, TVFC has 50 agencies around the county that receive food for distribution to the needy, according to Denise Harkness, coordinator of TVFC. To show the immensity of the problem, Harkness said, last year 34,000 children received emergency food boxes — one out of every four children in the county.

It was apparent from the comments that United Way's 10 percent reduction in contributions last year had caused some concern. But the community action leaders were optimistic about the future. They believe local residents will continue to support these efforts to alleviate the struggles of those with low income.

Among WCCAO's programs that receive United Way funding are affordable housing options (\$10,712), basic needs services (\$14,773), comprehensive information and referral services (\$19,953), homeless service program (\$29,284), parent education program (\$5,000), and the Tualatin Valley Food Center (\$14,759).

For more information about United Way, call 226-9326. For more information about WCCAO's programs, call 648-6646.