

Hunger, housing challenges go hand in hand

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The crowd scrambled to its feet. Four hundred strong, we applauded long and hard, until, finally, Gov. Kulongoski raised both palms, requesting quiet.

We were stirred by his message of challenge and hope for Oregonians struggling to live on food stamps.

The huge audience, assembled for the 2007 Oregon Housing Conference at the Salem Conference Center, included far more than a host of advocates for the state's poor.

Many developers, bankers and planners were there -- professionals who had come together to learn and share information about best practices to build and sustain low-income housing.

Our keynote speaker did far more than link the challenges people in poverty must confront in feeding and housing their families and obtaining health care.

The governor drove home the point by pulling from his pocket a peanut butter sandwich, meager fare compared to the table set for the rest of us sheepishly munching chicken cordon bleu.

Gov. Kulongoski's food-stamp diet touched a national nerve.

Headlines blazed across the country and the airwaves crackled with the message -- all too many Americans suffer under the financial burdens of low wages and penurious supports.

Not a one-day story, the governor's polite remonstrance launched Oregon Hunger Awareness Week into an orbit of multiple news cycles and into our collective consciousness.

Gov. Kulongoski made us proud for having the courage to eat for a week as do about 12 percent of our fellow Oregonians who survive on food stamps.

But there's a deeper message, one that the Statesman Journal reported from the housing conference (April 25).

Quoting the governor, the reporter wrote: "People who pay too much for housing are more likely to be hungry and lack adequate health insurance ...

"For some of the lowest-income families, many working and raising children, the

squeeze of high housing, transportation and energy costs can push them into homelessness."

The governor is calling for action from state lawmakers on the housing front.

Not as dramatic as eating a peanut butter sandwich -- surviving on a buck a meal -- Gov. Kulongoski has included in his recommended budget more than \$16 million to leverage about 150 units of supported housing for the homeless.

He wants another \$8 million to help pay for existing rent-assisted housing for Oregonians who cannot fend for themselves.

His vision includes \$2 million to allow my department, Housing and Community Services, to continue the important work of providing affordable home ownership and rental housing.

In addition, he wants an increase in document- recording fees to support affordable housing.

Many of us in the housing advocacy and finance communities are rallying behind Gov. Kulongoski to promote these important initiatives that will provide Oregonians proper places to live and give them a foundation for better lives.

Judging from the overwhelming ovation this message received at the housing conference and given the spectrum of professions represented there, I think Oregonians are embracing the need to help.

As the governor reasoned, "It's in our collective best interest."

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