

Director's Message

Date: December 11, 2007

To: Partners and Employees of Oregon Housing and
Community Services

From: Victor Merced, Director

Here's an update on the OHCS work to help in the state's relief for storm victims in Clatsop, Columbia, Lincoln, Tillamook and Yamhill counties:

- Emergency housing funds have been allocated by OHCS to the Community Action Team working in Clatsop, Columbia and Tillamook counties to provide rental assistance to affected individuals and families.
- OHCS has approved use of vacant affordable-housing units for flood victims. These are units financed with Low-Income Housing Tax Credits and other federal and state resources.
- This OHCS decision comes in advance of expected action by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development along with the Internal Revenue Service, via the recent declaration by President Bush, to provide additional shelter using at least 240 vacant units of department-financed affordable housing.
- Funds from the Federal Emergency Management Administration have been made available through a declaration by President Bush to provide Public and Individual Assistance.

- This FEMA assistance can include: rental payments for temporary housing; grants for home repairs and replacement of household items not covered by insurance; grants to replace personal property and help with medical, dental, funeral and transportation costs not covered by insurance; unemployment payments; low-interest loans for residential losses; loans to small businesses; loans to farmers, ranchers and aquaculture operators; and crisis counseling.
- Oregon Food Bank, supported by OHCS, has authorized the release of 70,000 pounds of food for storm victims.

First-hand reports of the storm devastation are striking. As you probably know, OHCS Deputy Director Rick Crager, Housing Division Administrator Bob Gillespie and I have been alternating our time at the state's TOPOFF command center since the storm hit the north Oregon coast with hurricane-force winds and pounding rain a week and a half ago.

The damage to homes, farms and forests is extraordinary. It reminds us how tenuous life can be and the importance of OHCS in relieving misery.

Big game. A matter of hours before the storm came ashore, members of the OHCS executive team were meeting with partners in Eugene and Corvallis. These meetings also came on the eve of the annual Civil War football game between the rival university teams from those two cities.

Jocular comments aside—in support of the University of Oregon or Oregon State—the meetings were all business.

“We’re in a serious bind,” said Terry McDonald of St. Vincent de Paul at Eugene, dramatically stating that food and shelter support

is in decline there. “It’s been cut in half, and we anticipate it being cut in half again.”

The old network of supports are falling apart insisted McDonald: “There’s a shift in the baseline,” indicating it is moving in the wrong direction.

He called for more relief for renters. “People in need of rental assistance have increased at a precipitous rate. People are not able to pay their rent.”

Foreclosure hotline. The current housing market is under extreme stress, not so much in Oregon as in many states on the southern US tier. Still, the cumulative effect is expected to strike hard at the availability of housing capital, even in places like Oregon not directly suffering the subprime meltdown.

Still, for Oregonians who are caught in this mess, Sandy Halonen, executive director of the Neighborhood Economic Development Corporation at Eugene, has a plan, and it involves OHCS.

She explained her work with our agency and with the Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services to create a homebuyer hotline for the state. “I think Oregon Housing and Community Services should be a role model here,” stated Halonen.

She is also advocating homebuyer training via the Oregon Bond Program to keep Oregonians out of the consumer trap that subprime borrowing can spring when mortgage interest adjusts upward to levels buyers cannot pay.

Housing sorrows. A rural lament came through at the Eugene meeting. The mayor of Oakridge, a town once flush with timber capital, said landlords there all too often do not adequately

maintain their rental housing, allowing it to mold until it's marginally habitable.

Other advocates see permanent housing as a key ingredient in stopping ex-offenders from committing crimes and landing back in lock-up. Roughly half of the people coming out of the Lane County jail have no place to go, and they re-offend, we were told.

These caring advocates who work tirelessly for the betterment of their community called on OHCS to provide technical assistance to small, specialized organizations, such as theirs, that apply to our agency for tax-credit financing. They wish to enhance their chances of success when applying for the critical funding needed to make their projects successful, such as housing for men and women released from incarceration.

More application woes. Frustration with the OHCS Consolidated Funding Cycle application followed the executive team to Corvallis. There, after the meeting, one affordable-housing builder asked the status of placing the CFC application online.

It's now there, I am pleased to report. And the hope is that OHCS will, in short time, make it "dynamic," so it can be filled-out online.

Separate from this, another builder, using local funds, said the challenges of obtaining approval for environmental analysis dramatically slows the construction process and jeopardizes completion of projects. "I know this is outside your control," he said, referring to the OHCS executive team, "but something's going to fail as the result of this."

Housing PLUS. In Corvallis and Eugene, Deputy Director Crager made it clear that Housing PLUS, the OHCS pilot, funded by the 2007 Legislature, to finance 150 units of permanent, supportive

housing does not obviate the need for shelters that give overnight succor to homeless persons.

We're not picking one over the other. We recognize the importance of shelters. As one Eugene advocate noted, shelters help free up police to do police work. Many homeless persons need short-term accommodations to get back on their feet.

But the chronically homeless need more, and data from Portland and other cities demonstrate that permanent, supportive housing saves money. OHCS created Housing PLUS, to test this strategy that is expected to keep desperate, homeless people out of jails, off the streets and out of hospital emergency rooms.

A longtime OHCS partner at Corvallis put it so very well. "You're just trying to see if it's wibbly-wobbly," said Barbara Ross, former state legislator and housing advocate.

We're not familiar with that phraseology, but we all know what it means. Better still, we're out to fine-tune the already-proved Housing PLUS model to eliminate any wibbly-wobbly affectations.

Ross hinted that local planning for the homeless population is not always peaches and cream. Local entities can get territorial about creating their 10-year plans to end homelessness. She also indicated that the potential infusion of homeless planning money from the Oregon Legislature has calmed local waters.

Another advocate close to OHCS, Tom Clancey-Burns, executive director of Community Services Consortium, called on our agency to contribute more on a number of fronts: to smooth local processes where possible, to deliver more information and to improve food and housing allocations for native tribes.

Great ideas were forthcoming from Corvallis and Eugene partners, as has been the case at all the other road-trips venues during the past two and one-half months. It's heart-warming to observe just how much our partners care about vulnerable Oregonians who depend for survival on the work we all do—rain or shine.

Individual commitment to a group effort—that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.

~Vince Lombardi