

Homelessness and Workforce Housing Punctuate Partner Comments

(The ClearingHOUSE Article – Fall/Winter 2007 Issue)

For More Information

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We've covered a big chunk of the state since early October, getting the flavor of the vast territory and culture.

The OHCS executive team has been on the road, visiting partners who serve people in wide swaths of eastern, central and coastal Oregon, the southwest interior and the Willamette Valley.

The most pressing issues plaguing partners across the state clearly are demands on local communities;

- To help homeless persons survive.
- To mitigate the disparity between worker incomes

that are far too low to afford housing in the very towns where people earn their livings.

We at OHCS are not only listening to our community-service and housing partners, we are fine-tuning our policies to meet their needs and the needs of Oregonians themselves.

Housing fund. OHCS Director **Victor Merced** took the opportunity while on the road to deliver a message of hope. It comes in the form of a strategy to capture more funds to preserve existing housing—to the tune of \$50 million.

“This is a big deal,” Victor told partners everywhere we went—community action agencies, housing authorities, elected officials and others. The preservation fund, or trust fund, is being developed by the Enterprise Foundation, Meyer Memorial Trust, Metro regional government, the City of Portland and OHCS. Yes, our agency is a direct player.

In addition to preserving existing housing, money from the fund could also be distributed to purchase land for future affordable housing—in other words, land banking. The entire state will be served by the trust, and we expect it will make a mighty dent in the housing deficit faced by many Oregonians.



OHCS Director **Victor Merced** (left), and Regional Field Representative to the Department, **H. Jack Duncan** (right), talk with Community Leaders in Lincoln City on how to address homelessness and the demand for affordable workforce housing in the coastal areas.

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Data crunching. On the workforce housing front, **Bob Gillespie**, administrator of the OHCS Housing Division, discussed with partners the dramatic differences between low pay and high housing costs across the state.

He made it clear, “Much of what we do is workforce housing.” OHCS provides tax-credit financing, he explained, to house employed Oregonians—working people. “But there’s workforce rental housing and there’s homeownership,” Gillespie stated, emphasizing the difference.

The devil is in the details, as the old saw goes, so OHCS is making a careful study of workforce housing in communities across Oregon. This number crunching, says Gillespie, will parse the disparity between wages and housing costs in various Oregon regions and communities.

Preliminary data was presented to the Oregon Housing Council during its December-7 meeting. In time, the information will create a valuable mosaic of Oregon’s rental and homeownership needs—in resort towns, mid-sized cities, and farm and ranch communities.

That way OHCS will be closer to knowing where the big workforce problems lie—in those places where workers are forced to live many miles from their jobs and where they are increasingly driven to say no to distant employment as escalating fuel prices shrink the precious dollars necessary to feed their young families.

Stories from the road can be gloomy. Still, there’s great news: OHCS and partners are working hard to find solutions, and we’re doing it.

OHCS is the state housing finance agency, providing financial and program support to create and preserve opportunities for quality, affordable housing for lower income Oregonians. The agency also administers federal and state antipoverty, homeless and energy assistance community service programs.

