

Entry Name: *Searching for Home: Homelessness in Rural Oregon*

Category Name: **Communications—Creative Media**

Recognizes the creative use of media, including media campaigns, electronic media, and websites that most effectively promote HFA activities, programs, products, or services and advance the HFA mission.

Housing Agency: **Oregon Housing and Community Services**

Overview

In a two-year project culminating in June 2008, Oregon Housing and Community Services led a comprehensive team of state agency leaders and representatives of service providers to develop *A Home for Hope: A 10-year plan to end homelessness in Oregon*. The plan describes new action in the areas of prevention and intervention, permanent housing with supportive services, and systems change. It supports and complements the department's mission to provide "leadership that enables Oregonians to gain housing, become self-sufficient, and achieve prosperity."

One of the most significant challenges in developing the 10-year plan was the lack of accurate information about people experiencing homelessness. Negative biases about people experiencing homelessness present significant barriers to making the policy and programmatic changes needed to end the problem in Oregon.

A new DVD media presentation, *Searching for Home: Homelessness in Rural Oregon*, highlights the realities for individuals and families experiencing homelessness and provides a springboard for candid conversations about the prejudices and stereotypes that impede meaningful action to end homelessness.

The DVD challenges four commonly held and stereotypes:

1. **Myth:** Only single people are homeless.
Fact: Nearly 60 percent of those counted as homeless during the state's one-night count were families with children
2. **Myth:** People choose to be homeless.
Fact: Homelessness has its roots in poverty, lack of affordable housing, substance abuse, mental illness, and domestic violence.
3. **Myth:** People experiencing homelessness do not work and do not want to work.
Fact: Many people in poverty do work, but due to economic barriers, lack of education, or the presence of disabilities, are unable to get and keep full-time employment.
4. **Myth:** People experiencing homelessness are dangerous.
Fact: People experiencing homelessness are often the target of crime, and nearly 15 percent of Oregon's homeless report being victims of domestic violence.

The DVD project supports one of the state's 10-year plan's six core goals: to "Implement education and public awareness campaigns to remove societal stigma about homelessness and to build community support and coordinated responses."

When and why it was undertaken

Oregon features large rural, even frontier-like, expanses. Estimates put the national percentage of rural homelessness at 9 percent¹. In contrast, the Oregon 2007 One Night Count found that people living in rural parts of the state comprised 27 percent of people experiencing homelessness – three times the national rate.

¹ Burt, MR, Aron, LY, Douglas, R, Valente, J, and Iwen, B. 1999. *Homelessness: Programs and the People they Serve, Findings of the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients Technical Report*. Urban Institute. Washington, DC. Interagency Council on the Homeless.

The rate of homelessness in rural Oregon exceeds that of urban Oregon; for every 1,000 people living in rural Oregon, 3.65 people are homeless. In urban Oregon, the rate stands at 3.42. The rates for people experiencing chronic homelessness mirror this pattern with a rate of 1.91 per 1,000 rural Oregonians, and of 1.42 per 1,000 in the state's urban areas.

As high as this rate stands in official counts, policymakers and practitioners in the field of homelessness believe this count under-represents the scope of rural homelessness. The Oregon rural continuum of care did not conduct a street count in 2007, and rural Oregon's provider capacity to identify and serve people experiencing homelessness remains limited.

The same causes drive rural homelessness as drive urban homelessness; extreme poverty, lack of affordable quality housing, unemployment, mental illness, and chemical dependency all play a prominent role in homelessness wherever it occurs. However, people in rural Oregon face significant barriers to overcoming homelessness, such as higher unemployment rates, poor quality housing, higher poverty rates, poor access to services, and lack of affordable transportation.

In August of 2007, Rainy Gauvain, OHCS Homeless Programs Analyst, traveled to 15 rural Oregon counties and conducted over 50 interviews with people experiencing homelessness. She interviewed families with children, single men and unaccompanied youth – all of them homeless – living in shelters, by rivers, in vehicles, in parks, and along railroad tracks.

Because pictures and stories communicate more eloquently than statistics, OHCS created a visual and auditory record. The resulting DVD will help policymakers, advocates, and the public confront negative stereotypes and communicate the realities of homelessness in rural communities.

Project Accomplishments

Represents the first action in support of the state's 10-year plan to end homelessness goal: "Implement education and public awareness campaigns to remove societal stigma about homelessness and to build community support and coordinated responses."

Debunks myths about people experiencing homelessness by melding personal stories and research to disprove these commonly held beliefs.

Provides unprecedented insight into the circumstances of people experiencing homelessness in rural Oregon.

Gives people experiencing homelessness a chance to tell their own stories.

Adds to other indicators of rural homelessness for implementation of the statewide 10-year plan, *A Home for Hope*.

Why it is meritorious

Searching for Home: Homelessness in Rural Oregon is the first state-sponsored media campaign to describe issues specific to rural homelessness. Previously, the news media and policymakers focused on the most visible population – people experiencing homelessness in urban areas.

Searching for Home: Homelessness in Rural Oregon also provides a more complete portrait of homelessness. Typically, news media, the federal government, and service providers focus on chronically homeless single adults. The DVD features all sub-populations of people experiencing homelessness: youth, families, as well as chronically homeless individuals.

Searching for Home: Homelessness in Rural Oregon addresses the strongly held and faulty myths around the homeless that have impaired agencies' abilities to build support for projects that serve the homeless.

It is an effective tool to de-stigmatize homelessness in general, and to counterpoint notions about rural homelessness. It dispels the prevailing notion in rural communities that homeless people like to live in

tents; it shows that they too are victims of hate and crime; that they too long for community belonging and participation.

How it responds to the 2008 judging criteria

Innovative—Through pictures and their own words, individuals describe their unique journeys into homelessness ... shattering our misperceptions about the causes of and the choices that lead to homelessness. More often than not, homelessness is a form of extreme poverty and the “choice” to become homeless an act of self-preservation and desperation. For people with few resources – education, income, or social supports – homelessness isn’t a matter of choice but of survival.

This project set out to show that at its core, homelessness is about regular people and that being homeless does not diminish their humanity or desire to contribute to society, support their families, and be safe.

Searching for Home: Homelessness in Rural Oregon provides a visually and aurally compelling view of this significant social and economic problem.

Replicable—Gauvain undertook the project with just a camera, a digital voice recorder, some food to share, and a commitment to engage in a dialogue with people experiencing homelessness. Once she returned to the office, she and a colleague reviewed the tapes and the photos, and melded them into a unified presentation using desktop production tools available in most workplaces.

Reach target audiences—To date, audiences for *Searching for Home: Homelessness in Rural Oregon* include attendees of the Oregon Coalition on Housing and Homelessness Annual Conference, the Mid-Valley Continuum of Care Coalition, the Oregon State Housing Council, and Governor’s staff.

The *Searching for Home: Homelessness in Rural Oregon* DVD will serve as the basis for discussion on rural homelessness at the upcoming October 2008 OHCS Housing and Poverty Conference, the state’s largest gathering of practitioners in the field of housing development and community action.

OHCS will post the presentation on its website, for easy access to those seeking to understand the nature of homelessness, or those seeking to influence policymakers, private foundations, and others who can help end homelessness.

Achieve measurable results—Each viewer has a better understanding of the challenges facing the state’s rural homeless after viewing the video, because it provides a more compelling description of the nature of homelessness than could any set of charts and tables.

People experiencing homelessness tell their own stories.

Provide benefits that outweigh costs—Production of the DVD is a one-time investment, while it can serve as a long-term tool for all working toward an end to homelessness. It provides insight at a much lower cost than taking policymakers and others on a tour of the rural Oregon.

Educates those that serve, set policy for, or design programs for people experiencing homelessness.

Demonstrates effective use of resources—It is an inexpensive and effective means for documenting rural homelessness and raising awareness around all types of homelessness including families, the elderly, and unaccompanied youths. Duplication costs are minimal, and use of the internet permits the agency to distribute the information at low or no cost.

Achieve strategic objectives—It will support the state’s efforts to meet its strategic objective to de-stigmatize homelessness, as expressed in Goal 5 of the state’s 10-year plan to end homelessness: Implement education and public awareness campaigns to remove societal stigma about homelessness and to build community support and coordinated responses.

It will help local advocates and service providers to engage further local and state leaders in finding better ways to serve homeless people in rural areas.