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## LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

**Date:** March 26, 2009

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### Senate bill calls for united front to tackle homelessness

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Powerful testimony before the Senate Committee on Commerce and Workforce yesterday hit home the need to support Senate Bill (SB) 200.

"I put a needle in my vein for the last time on Oct. 31, 2003," testified **John Atten**, a recovering heroin addict and homelessness survivor. "I have been clean for 1,069 days due to the efforts of people such as yourselves, and others, who believed that my addiction and my homelessness were not permanent conditions."

SB 200 has the potential to deliver statewide a model of coordinated housing and services similar to that which effectively served Atten and others like him. The bill reorients state agency policy to a more efficient, collaborative response to the problem of homelessness.

Atten's 15-year heroin addiction led him to several programs, ending with the Central City Concern's Worksource program that enabled him to leverage his existing work skills into a new career. Today, he serves as the occupancy and compliance manager for CCC's 1,300 affordable housing units. Atten works extensively with Oregon Housing and Community Services (OHCS) to ensure the effective delivery of CCC's housing model to some of the most challenging and hardest to house populations in Portland.

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"I present my story today in order that you might see what can be accomplished by pairing housing with a coordinated continuum of services," he told committee members. "For most like me, there usually develops a window in which the horror, and misery, of where we find ourselves overshadows the fear of the unknown. The fear of asking for help, and the fear of facing the wreckage we have created, in our own lives and the lives of others. But ultimately, at a moment when I became willing, the availability of treatment, employment services, and safe, supportive housing were keys to my becoming who I am today."

Witnesses at the hearing represented the needs of children, special needs populations, and older Oregonians. Reinforcing the multi-system impact of homelessness, representatives of state, local and federal government, nonprofits and elected officials filled the hearing room.

SB 200 establishes state policy regarding homelessness by focusing on permanent rather temporary housing solutions.

"In doing so, the state has stepped forward to assert that whenever possible, 'housing first' becomes the viable response to the homeless situation," said **Chris Flammang**, commissioner on the Governor's Commission on Senior Services. "As such, SB 200 reflects the 10-year homeless plans currently being developed in many counties throughout the state."

**Rick Crager**, deputy director of OHCS, cited troubling findings from Oregon's annual homeless count, including a 9 percent rise in homelessness statewide between 2007 and 2008.

Half of Oregon's homeless people identified in the count were families, and almost one-fourth were living on the street without any type of assistance, **Crager** reported.

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"The count identified more than 2,700 children age 11 and younger as being homeless," **Crager** added. "That's 22 percent of the people counted in 2008."

**Dona Bolt**, the education specialist for the homeless for the state Department of Education, called the growing number of children under age 5 "a ticking time bomb to schools."

"In Deschutes County alone, it would take 12 school busses to ferry our 767 homeless children to school," said **Tammy Baney**, Deschutes County commissioner.

The Yamhill Homeless Leadership Coalition's latest numbers show homeless children outranking the numbers of single men and women. To deal with the problem, Lee Means, with Yamhill Community Action Program, called for a "unified command" of all services and nonprofits.

**Bill Hall**, Ending Homelessness Advisory Council vice-chair and Lincoln County commissioner, told committee members that working together was the way to "bring down the silos."

"SB 200 clearly establishes Oregon's philosophy toward solutions for homelessness," **Flammang** said, hammering home the concept, and on behalf of the Governor's Commission, urging passage of the bill.

Passage of SB200 is even more critical in light of rankings recently released by the National Center of Family Homelessness. Oregon placed sixth among the strongest states for planning, yet 37<sup>th</sup> for the number of homeless children in the nation, where first is best and 50th is worst.

"It's time for Oregon to move from excellence in planning to excellence in meeting the needs of the needy adults, children and families experiencing homelessness," **Crager** told committee members.

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Once enacted, SB 200 will clarify the roles of OHCS, the Department of Human Services and the Interagency Council on Hunger and Homelessness in alleviating the causes and conditions of poverty in Oregon.

The bill passed unanimously to the Senate floor, carried by Committee Chair **Diane Rosenbaum** (D-Portland) and Vice-Chair **Chris Telfer** (R-Bend).

### In other action:

The Joint Ways and Means Transportation and Economic Development Committee gave OHCS permission to apply for two federal grants: approximately \$38.5 million of formula funding for the OHCS weatherization program and another \$475,000 in competitive funding for 24 full-time AmeriCorps members at local community action agencies over a one-year period. Both applications are in the first round of stimulus funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).

Also, the Senate Environment and Natural Resources committee is holding a work session this afternoon on SB 201. The bill appropriates funding for the OHCS energy efficiency program for the 2009-11 biennium.

The Senate Committee on Commerce and Workforce Development moved the following bills to the Senate floor during its Wednesday hearing:

- **HB 2256:** Asks the Legislature to create the same administrative efficiency in the approval process for the remaining housing program loans and grants, and allows OHCS to recommend guidelines for all that come before the State Housing Council for review.
- **HB 2257:** Allows OHCS and the State Housing Council to approve grants and loans funded by the Community Incentive Fund for preservation of affordable housing.

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## LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

- **HB 2258:** Changes the definition of lower-income households that can qualify for the Individual Development Account program. Such housing would be defined as the greater of 80 percent of area median income or 200 percent of the federal poverty level, enabling OHCS to more effectively serve these households.
- **HB 2259:** Brings Oregon into alignment with national practices for naming community action networks by changing "Community Action Directors of Oregon" to Community Action Partnership of Oregon."

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