

## **Washington County's Interfaith Committee on Homelessness**

Washington County has a faith based coalition, the Interfaith Committee on Homelessness (IFCH), which is active in a variety of ways around homelessness. Neighborhood Partnerships has been working with the IFCH for some time now – they are long time members of the [Oregon Housing Alliance](#), and have been very helpful as we work on issues of homelessness across the state of Oregon.

In early 2010, we spoke with several members of the IFCH regarding their history and work.

### **Catalyst**

In 2006, the congregants at the United Church of Christ in Forest Grove, Oregon learned about the failure of a local public safety levy. This levy funded many aspects of public safety, including partially funding the emergency shelter system for homeless people in Washington County. The congregation was concerned about this failure and its impacts, and began working to raise awareness about the problem of homelessness in Washington County and the need for the Public Safety levy.

### **Raising Awareness**

The group had two goals – first, to educate themselves about the problem of homelessness, and to share their knowledge with others; and second, to shine a light on the problem of homelessness in Washington County. The group understood that homelessness was viewed as a “Portland-problem,” not as a problem that impacted Washington County.

As they worked to increase awareness of homelessness in Washington County, the group adopted a variety of strategies. They worked to put a face on homelessness by helping other church members understand who was homeless in Washington County. They held one event where they slept outside of a local church on a cold fall night. In the context of IFCH's mission – education, putting a face on homelessness and advocating for the homeless – they have also sponsored four county town halls which bring the faith community, service providers and elected officials together. These both help to educate the public and generate media attention.

### **Opportunities for Engagement**

The IFCH works to create a wide range of options for everyone to be involved in the work of ending homelessness. Options include service, raising funds, and working with elected officials. Each congregant or congregation can be involved in the ways they feel most comfortable and to the degree that they are available. This tailored approach has been very successful, and has contributed to their impact.

### **Working with Elected Officials**

One area where the IFCH found they could have very effective involvement was in working with elected officials. This has taken several forms over the years. The IFCH:

- Provided funds raised from churches to the local Board of County Commissioners to keep shelters open in Washington County.
- Is involved with the Oregon Housing Alliance, as a member and participant. They have engaged their state representatives in the work to end homelessness and inspired them to be champions.
- Provided pressure to County elected officials to keep the Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness process moving forward.

They have found that they could often communicate with elected officials in a different and important way because they are not public employees or direct service providers.

### **Serving Others**

The IFCH has created a range of options for churches and congregants to be involved. One way that many choose to be involved is direct service to the homeless. IFCH often has issued a call to serve, saying "If we don't respond, who will?" Some of these services have included:

- Emergency Referral Training, which includes basic information and referral skills for church members. The presentation helps others understand what to do when someone is asking for help.
- Operating Severe Weather Shelters during the winter. Several churches in the Washington County area operate severe weather shelters or warming centers during winter months when the temperature drops. These shelters provide a warm place to sleep and a meal, and require volunteers from churches.

IFCH churches have also contributed in a variety of other ways, including providing meals, providing for homeless school children, operating compassion clinics, hosting Project Homeless Connect events, and even operating transitional housing.

We are pleased to work with the Washington County Interfaith Committee on Homelessness, and are always impressed by their work and dedication. We know that by building these strong partnerships we can end homelessness for all Oregonians.

To find out more about the Washington County Interfaith Committee on Homelessness, visit their website at: <http://ahomeoftheirown.com/>.