

**Okaloosa Walton Homeless Continuum of Care/
Opportunity, Inc.**

**Executive Director's Report
March 1, 2010**

Department of Children and Families Proposed Budget:

As is not news to most of you, the Department of Children and Families (Tallahassee executive branch) has proposed elimination of all homeless funding as part of their mandated 15% budget reduction. This may well be just an opening gambit as the parties sit down to negotiate, but it is still a strong threat to our programs. Many legislators would be all too willing to toss out homeless programs, since voting turnout among the homeless is very low; and sympathy for the homeless among the voting population has not always been strong.

Many of you have responded to this news by calling our legislators (Senators Gaetz and Peadar – we don't have a representative at the moment). We have also gotten good play from the media about the impact of these cuts. Please continue to let our legislators know exactly what this funding does and what it means to the lives of our clients. Personal experience is great. If you have had to increase the number of meals served, or you have watched someone get a job because they finally got their teeth, if you have seen someone successfully transition from homeless to housed because of government funding, let everyone know.

Public attitudes about homelessness are changing. Homelessness or near-miss homelessness has been impacting neighborhoods that were formally secure, and the amazing work you do all the time has demonstrated that there are solutions, and homeless people do recover.

Cold Night Shelters:

One of the most distressing effects of the proposed cuts would be the undercutting of our cold night shelters. We are asking superhuman effort from our cold night churches and volunteers, especially this winter which seems interminable.

When talking to the Daily News, I said that the removal of funds would probably not close down the cold night shelters immediately. However, some of the smaller churches that rely on our funds the most would have to fold. This, in turn, would put more pressure on the larger churches that might be able to absorb the additional fiscal expense, but eventually the human toll of doing multiple nights would end the program. Another winter like this one, coupled with little relief and no financial support, would be the end.

Hopefully this will not happen, and we can keep on with our Band-aid approach for a little while longer. However, we clearly need to press forward with Plan B. It may be possible that we can get some help from unexpected quarters. DeFuniak Springs and Walton County governments have been opening cold night shelters (with the help of the

Red Cross and local churches) in both the north and south ends of Walton County this year, and finding it workable. Also, the Red Cross has expressed willingness to provide meals for any cold night shelters that open up. And, of course, we will keep seeking solutions to the issues of a permanent shelter. We have the example of Opportunity Place we can use. The community expressed strong concern about the impact of a homeless shelter, and, as shown by the newspaper article Sunday, Feb. 28, has fully accepted it as a neighbor. There may be room for cautious optimism.

As requested by the membership last month, I have written a letter of appreciation to the Walton County officials involved. Although it is difficult for me, I'm trying to hone it down to 250 words so that it can run as a letter to the editor soon.

Point-in-Time Survey:

We have completed most of our data entry as obtained on simple counts. Most of our data this year, however, was gathered via long survey forms. Steve Hopkins has just about completed creating a format we can use through the HMIS system, which means we will begin entering data from the long forms this week. Since the report has to be in by March 31, I can guarantee that you will have the final results by the April meeting.

Muscogee Creek Nation:

Thanks to so many members of the community who have demonstrated enormous empathy and compassion to the area around Bruce, Florida. I cannot begin to list them all, but everyone who has provided help has been awesome. Ann Tucker, Creek Tribal Councilwoman, has been working closely with Keli Cummings and other members of the Opportunity, Inc. staff, along with representatives of churches, government agencies, and not-for-profits in trying to set up a coordinated distribution of resources. Graduate students from the University of Southern California (USC) saw our website, and are coming March 14 to help us with our needs assessment. Right now we are trying to meet emergency needs for food, clothes and blankets, but by the end of the month, hope to have lists of who needs windows, doors, insulation, and/or floors; who needs a safe water supply; who has what marketable skills and who needs education and vocational training, etc. It won't be entirely comprehensive – folks are scattered pretty widely through nearly inaccessible woods – but it will be a good start in bringing long-term change to a struggling community.

Homeless Prevention/ Rapid Rehousing Program (HPRP) Fund:

We received HPRP funds in mid-February, and have been writing checks at a good clip ever since. We have spent over half of our designated funds for Okaloosa County, and have applications on hand from which to draw the rest. Keli has spent a lot of time on HPRP outreach in Walton, and is getting more qualified applicants, but she could definitely use some help. If you work, live, have connections in Walton County and can direct applicants our way, please do so. Remember that in order to qualify, applicants must have demonstrated work histories and have the skills to return to self-sufficiency by the end of their participation in the program. Also, they must both be tenants, and have a lease. We have found lots of "gentleman's agreements" in Walton County, and that will not pass the scrutiny of auditors.

Opportunity Place:

I do a lot of public speaking these days, and everywhere I go I tell people that the job I have now is the happiest job I have ever had. The primary reason this is true is because of Opportunity Place. Under the leadership of CC and Lydia, it just blossoms. In just a few weeks time, nine heads of households staying at the shelter got full-time jobs, with benefits. I had the great pleasure of writing rent and utility deposit checks out of our rapid re-housing fund for five families this week who have demonstrated the ability to stand on their own. Another two families used income tax returns and savings from jobs started while at Opportunity Place to find the housing, transportation and work tools necessary to move out. It just doesn't get any better than this.

Each of these families are free with their admissions that this would not have happened without CC and Lydia, and they will be the first to say it wouldn't have happened without the strong collaboration between Opportunity Place and many of you. Between JobsPlus, Child Care Services, the Health Department, and volunteers from churches, companies and civic groups, we have been blessed with connections and resources beyond what any one agency could manage.

One of the best examples came only the other day. We took in a single mom from Crestview, whose boyfriend, and father of her children tossed them out with literally only the clothes they were wearing. The mom came to us with six children, ages 6 months to 13. Two of the children have pulmonary disease, and require night-time ventilators. An entire community swung into action, providing food, clothes, blankets, medical aids, diapers – everything they could need. When I met the mother and the baby Friday, they were cheerful, hopeful, and the baby girl was a real heart-throb (I'm expecting a granddaughter in late April, so maybe I'm prejudiced there, but the baby is adorable). The mother has reconnected with her family, and left to rejoin them in Tennessee. What could have been an horrific tragedy in this cold winter turned into a sweet story with a happy outcome. Almost every day is like that..

HUD/ HMIS

CC and I will be going to Jacksonville right after our April membership meeting, and will be meeting with HUD staff regarding the last round of applications, the coming round of applications, and how we can maximize HUD funding for transitional and permanent housing, as well as for HMIS. The Hearth Act finally comes into effect with the next grant cycle (applications to be submitted this fall), and will affect how we apply for and execute HUD grants in the near future. Meanwhile, we continue to work with our own programs and others in expanding our current HMIS system so that it is useful for everyone.

Challenge Grant:

Normally at this time I am begging agencies and churches to turn in reports so that we can draw down our Challenge grant funds on a timely basis, even when our total amount was only \$60,000. This year our award was \$96,000, and, with help from

Mother Nature, we have had no problems in spending. We drained our last dime in January, and I submitted a request for our second draw the first of February. Although this money has not yet come in, I am hoping that it will at any moment, and that the invoices being submitted now will be paid out in a timely manner. Please get all reports in as quickly as ever, so that I can write checks as soon as funds come in (and also get my report in on time, which is required whether I have money to spend or not).

HHAG (Children in Crisis) Grant:

Ken Hair and I drove over to Pensacola on Feb. 16, so that I could sign the HHAG contract and he could sign papers relating to the mortgage. Ken and I then signed the contract between Opportunity, Inc., and Children in Crisis. I submitted our requests for funds via scanned letters immediately afterward, so that all was accomplished in a single day. Children in Crisis has been moving forward with this project, so funds are eagerly awaited by all. April Hargrove, the best contract manager in Florida, has been staying on top of the funding stream, and says we should expect to receive the first \$420,000 by the end of this week. We hope her ability to prophesy is better than mine ever is. Meanwhile, this project is looking absolutely wonderful, and we are most appreciative of Children in Crisis, DCF and everyone else who has worked to make the teen transition home a reality.

Community Awareness

I have tried to keep you abreast of where we go and who we talk to, so that you can connect with some of our contacts and use the extra awareness to your advantage (which is to our advantage – we prosper as our members prosper). However, I'm throwing in the towel. Between Keli, CC and me, we are everywhere all the time. I personally have never been to so many church services in my life. In a previous life, I was content with one a week. Now, I can attend as many as four on a Sunday, starting the last three weeks at 7 a.m. (Methodists seem to like to get moving at unholy hours). We are getting tremendous cooperation from the media, including great articles in Walton County papers as well as Okaloosa County papers. We have found our way into high school newspapers, on the air on Channels 3 and 7, in chamber of commerce reports. This trend is not slowing down at all, which in a time of tight governmental budgets is a very good thing.

Travel:

I will be off March 19, heading down to Orlando for my daughter's baby shower. Other than that, March looks to be a month at home.

Meeting Dates:

The next meeting will be held April, 3:30 p.m., at the Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce. We have had great feedback concerning our presenters, and I am finalizing plans for new resources to come next month. Please join us.

- Lenore Wilson