

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

**Executive Director's Report  
April 5, 2010**

***Department of Children and Families Proposed Budget:***

There is still a lot of time left between now and April 30 (the end of the legislative session), so it doesn't do to get too optimistic about the state of this year's budget and how it affects our homeless programs. But Senators Gaetz and Peaden have done a remarkable job in ensuring that the Challenge Grant remains at its current level, and other programs, such as the emergency housing fund, still exist. While I firmly admire both our senators for their stance in this issue, I can't help but believe that a lot of the credit goes to the many of you who took the time to call, write and e-mail. It was a huge team effort. Let's keep going until we get to the finish line.

***Cold Night Shelters:***

It appears that spring has finally arrived, and summer is hard on its heels. This should give us some time to start strategic planning on how to provide relief to churches and volunteers. By happy coincidence, this is the time of the year we begin our annual strategic planning process. Suggestions on how to maximize the effectiveness of this program are welcome. We are getting some excellent data to help us shape forward policy.

***Point-in-Time Survey:***

And speaking of data, the point-in-time data is available as promised by today's meeting. It is posted on the website, and contains some interesting data. By this count, homelessness has gone down significantly in Okaloosa County - from almost 2600 to 1842. The higher numbers in Walton County are in large part due to better reporting - we actually found where homeless people are encamped. The actual count of 420 is probably still low - it is difficult to get out to many of the areas along the rivers, and a single day is not a lot of time. Sadly, the only population to increase was that of children under age 18. The number of chronically homeless continues to decline, though the number of chronically homeless vets has not dropped significantly. Vets represent about 60% of our chronically homeless population.

***Homeless Prevention/ Rapid Rehousing Program (HPRP) Fund:***

Our second quarter of homeless prevention/ rapid re-housing funding is in the books, and we had some terrific successes. The first quarter we were able to assist 59 households, primarily in homeless prevention, and primarily in Okaloosa County. This quarter we assisted 77 households who either were homeless or would have been homeless but for this assistance. About 30% were assisted through rapid re-housing, and 25% were assisted in Walton County. Another 30% come from the northern end of Okaloosa County.

We have brought Dianne McManus on board to run our Walton County office, and she can find qualified applicants and spend money. In two weeks we helped 16 households with \$15,000 dollars, which is not bad for government work. Dianne has a long history with the Workforce Development Board, which is a terrific recommendation. Della ShawGoodson has taken over our Crestview office, and is also exhibiting a strong measure of competence and calm. Della has a background as a school guidance counselor, which seems to slide right over into our line of work.

A few success stories are probably in order now: we have one woman who started a cleaning business after we assisted her, and nailed down contracts with various condo groups. She is now employing others of our clients, and all are well on their way back to self-sufficiency. Others have used the respite from struggle to complete their education, and are now back in the work force. Still another has realized her life's dream, and is now a sworn law enforcement officer. The program is definitely having an effect.

### ***Opportunity Place:***

Opportunity Place may still be awaiting its first anniversary, but it is making a mark. We are getting visitors from across the Panhandle, eager to see the shelter everyone is talking about. Easter was a big deal, from egg hunts and Easter baskets to special meals. Thanks to the large number of volunteers who help - we couldn't exist without you. This is not just a platitude - although we have (in theory) government grants to help Opportunity Place, these dollars are not reliable (ask Children in Crisis about this). They come in their own time, at their own choosing, and it is not unusual for three months to go by without anything at all. Our volunteers, through their donations of time, goods, and dollars, keep us on our feet, and our resident families secure.

### ***HUD/ HMIS***

I will be going to Jacksonville right after our meeting (CC is leaving earlier). We 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.

Steve Hopkins worked long and hard to configure our HMIS system to handle the point-in-time count. Both the initial configuration and data retrieval were much more challenging than anticipated, but data entry was simple. Now that we have the system in place, we should be able to get better data each year. Steve is going to configure the program to handle data from Opportunity Place, and start moving in earnest to get other community organizations on line.

### ***Challenge Grant:***

The Challenge Grant funds came in on schedule, and we were able to disburse \$15,000 of the \$24,000 we received. As soon as I complete the reports from this month, we will request our third and final draw. Please get your reports in by this afternoon, so that

Stephanie can have them ready for my review (and check writing) on Friday when I get back into town.

***HHAG (Children in Crisis) Grant:***

I'm sure Ken Hair and the folks at Children in Crisis were losing faith, but the first check from DCF finally came at the end of March. We had hoped we could draw down 75% of the funds at the get-go, since funding was so delayed. However, this was not to be, and DCF set up a schedule of 25% per month during March, April, May and June. Meanwhile, the building is nearly complete anyway, as the contractor as well as Children in Crisis have been unbelievably patient and understanding.

***Travel:***

I will am headed out the door for Jacksonville the minute the meeting lets out, and will be gone until Friday. After that, I don't know. When my granddaughter decides to make her appearance, I'll be on my way to Orlando to meet her.

***Meeting Dates:***

The next meeting will be held May 3, at 3:30 p.m., at the Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce. Beth Norton will be on hand to discuss protocols for health emergencies, which I think all of us will find highly relevant and enlightening.

- Lenore Wilson