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Mid-Willamette Homeless Initiative prepares to implement strategies

Salem, OR – The Mid-Willamette Homeless Initiative wrapped up its yearlong task to identify and launch strategies to reduce homelessness in the Mid-Willamette Valley. The task force held its final meeting on February 7 at Keizer Civic Center, adopting a strategic plan that includes more than 40 recommendations. Task force members also endorsed hiring a project manager to coordinate plan implementation. The plan anticipates a Memorandum of Understanding for participating organizations. An executive team will oversee the project manager's work.

Over the last year, the task force participated in presentations ranging from veterans and the mentally ill to runaway and homeless youth. Eight sub-committees involving task force members, technical experts and interested citizens held in-depth discussions on affordable housing, public safety, support services and education, and more. The Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency coordinated surveys and interviews with 57 homeless individuals or groups, gaining insights into their needs. Keizer Mayor Cathy Clark said, "By listening to people in our own community who have been or are homeless, along with service and housing professionals who shared experiences and lessons learned, we now have a realistic plan of action in which everyone can find a place to make a difference. We can use our resources better to serve individuals as well as tackle larger challenges of safe and secure housing and employment."

One thing is certain, there is no typical profile for people experiencing homelessness. It is estimated that there are approximately 1,660 homeless people in Marion and Polk counties on any given day, including families with children. Other populations experiencing homelessness include veterans, seniors, runaway and homeless youth and people with addictions or mental health issues. This means no single strategy will solve the problem. Marion County Commissioner Janet Carlson said, "To effectively address this issue, we have to do more than just meet basic needs. Our strategies need to get to the root causes of homelessness and help people move into permanent housing."

While there is still a great deal to accomplish, participating organizations have already made progress on a number of fronts. For example, Marion County is seeking a HUD waiver to use \$1.2 million to create a reentry transitional housing facility and has also proposed legislation that will allow accessory dwelling units, or secondary apartments, in rural areas. And, last year, the city of Keizer added accessory dwelling units and cottage clusters to its development code. Mountain West Investment Corporation received \$5 million in state housing grant funds and an additional \$1.15 of Urban Renewal and HOME Investment funds through the City of Salem for an affordable housing development on Portland Road. Union Gospel Mission is gearing up for a

capital campaign to expand its men's shelter. The City of Salem is actively working on a sobering center and offered space for additional warming centers during the recent cold spell.

Most importantly, participating organizations agree that everyone must work together to make an impact. Salem Mayor Chuck Bennett said, "This is a tremendous platform for each of our communities to build upon and we must all commit to proceed forward."

For a copy of the strategic plan, visit www.homelesstaskforce.net.

The Mid-Willamette Homeless Initiative is a collaborative effort initiated by the cities of Salem and Keizer and Marion and Polk counties to seek solutions to reduce homeless in the Mid-Willamette region. Co-chairs included Salem Mayor Chuck Bennett, Keizer Mayor Cathy Clark and Marion County Commissioner Janet Carlson.