

The Dalles Chronicle
Kids suffer in poor economy
By Esther K. Smith
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The issue of child abuse and neglect will be the main focus of the Wasco County Commission on Children & Families during the next two years, says to Christa Rude, WCCCF administrator.

Rude spoke to Kiwanis Club Thursday during its regular meeting at Spooky's Restaurant.

Rude said that, according to figures provided by the state Department of Human Services, Wasco County ranks 24th out of the 36 Oregon counties in the rate of child abuse/neglect cases per 1,000 children (the first ranking having the lowest rate). There were 101 victims, a rate of 17.4 per 1,000, in Wasco County in 2008.

"It's not a good number," Rude said. "We are working with the DHS to try and understand why we are having such a problem with this."

The DHS has identified a list of family stressors that are most frequently associated with abuse and neglect cases in Wasco County, including suspected substance abuse, parental involvement with law enforcement, domestic violence, new baby or pregnancy, unemployment, financial distress and parental history of child abuse.

The stressors with the biggest increase in percentage between 2007 and 2008 were suspected substance abuse (from 42 to 51 percent), domestic violence (from 21 to 39 percent) and head of family unemployment (from 18 to 24 percent).

"If the head of the household is unemployed or the family is in financial distress, that's having an impact on the amount of stress in the family's situation," Rude said. "These are the risk factors. There's a whole other notion about trying to increase protective factors. When you see healthy families, people who are doing well, what do they have that allows them to function in a good way?"

To answer this question and others associated with the issue of child abuse and neglect, the WCCCF has decided to try something different this biennium: a collaborative funding approach. Rather than use the Request For Funding process that has been used in the past, the commission will invite individuals and groups who are interested in increasing the safety and well-being of children in Wasco County to gather together to share their knowledge, data and resources.

"Usually we have one group that comes in with an idea, but this time we'll have a bunch of ideas about what we want to do, and then we'll together decide how to use the money in a way that will really impact our child abuse and neglect," Rude said. "We can work together and talk about what systems exist in our community, where things are missing and what we can really do to make a difference in that."

The Wasco County Commission on Children & Families is not a service agency but plans, advocates and mobilizes the community to act on behalf of children, youth and families; promoting their health, safety, and well-being. WCCCF receives and manages grant resources, such as state, federal and private foundation grants for distribution to community-based agencies, organizations and individuals.

The Oregon Commission on Children & Families allocates both state and federal funds to Wasco County for services and support to children ages 0-18 and their families. These more flexible state and federal funds will be strategically allocated toward the issue of local child abuse and neglect.

Rude invited the Kiwanis, whose international club motto is “Serving the Children of the World,” to be a part of this collaborative effort. The Kiwanis and others are asked to fill out a registration form listing their particular awareness, knowledge and experience in the area of child abuse and neglect, and what prevention or intervention work they might have done.

Participants are also asked to read background information online including the DHS Status of Children in Oregon 2008 report, “Preventing Child Maltreatment” on the Future of Children Web site, and “Promoting Healthy Families in Your Communities” resource packet on the childwelfare.gov Web site.

Having done that homework, participants will be asked to attend three meetings: The first, scheduled for Nov. 24, will review services currently in place and determine what else is needed; the second, Dec. 1, will focus on strategies for addressing those needs and coming up with a collective plan for the safety of Wasco County children; and the last meeting, date not yet determined, will be dedicated to figuring out how best to fund and implement the plan.

“This is the first time we have had a chance to take this issue on in this way,” Rude said. “I really believe and trust that everyone’s best interest is for making a significant impact, and that the collective awareness of what we’re all doing will be empowering as we continue through the next couple of years of our planning.”