

Brentwood-Darlington-based early childhood development program saved by city

By MERRY MACKINNON
FOR THE BEE

ocial social service agencies are able to plug funding gaps, some of Southeast Portland's low-income families struggle more than ever to make ends meet. One supervisor at nonprofit Portland Impact, a community action agency located in the Brentwood-Darlington Community Center, has watched in dismay as the effort to alleviate poverty has been growing increasingly difficult.

"We're like little sailboats in a huge ocean," says Portland Impact's Parent-Child Specialist Supervisor Cheryl Troser. "So many of our families have greater stressors in their lives, because the economy is pretty bleak and social services aren't as available as they used to be."

Troser has worked in Portland Impact's early childhood program for about 12 years—almost as long as she's resided in the Woodstock neighborhood. Originally, her program primarily targeted Southeast Portland families with 97202, 97206 and 97214 ZIP codes, but Northeast Portland families recently became eligible too.

Included in the many family-oriented services which Troser and staff provide is a development program for prenatal to high school-age children. Additional services include guided interaction between children and parents, developmental screenings, education, home visits and referral for health care, utility bills and rent assistance.

"Our parents love their chil-

dren, but they couldn't afford to go out and buy this early childhood service," Troser says.

About four years ago, with the onset of the national recession, Troser began to see Southeast Portland's low-income families find fewer job options. On top of that, state budget cuts forced Portland Impact to search for other funding sources.

"We've had to get creative," says Troser. "Fortunately, the City of Portland stepped in, with a three-year grant from the Children's Investment Fund. Now families in Northeast Portland are included in the total of 215 children currently served."

"The only reason we have been able to continue is because we got the Children's Investment funding," Troser adds.

The Children's Investment Fund Internet website (www.childrensinvestmentfund.org) reminds us that Portland voters passed Measure 26-33 in 2002, creating the Children's Investment Fund (CIF). That resulted in approximately \$8.5 million a year for five years to "help children arrive at school ready to learn, provide safe and constructive after-school alternatives for kids, and prevent child abuse and neglect and family violence."

At Portland Impact, the Parent Child Program meets CIF's targeted vulnerable population—children. According to Columbia University's National Center for Children In Poverty website (www.nccp.org), 16 percent (130, 222) of Oregon's total of 813,292 children live in families with incomes at or below the

poverty level.

Of the families enrolled in Portland Impact's Parent Child Program, almost 90 percent live near or below the federal poverty level, which in 2004 was set at \$12,490 for a family of two. About two thirds of the clients receive Temporary Assistance For Needy Families. Twenty-seven percent are single parents. Thirty-five percent have no high school diploma. About 40 percent primarily speak either Russian, Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese or another Asian language.

Meanwhile, adding to some families' instability, Troser's view, is the way welfare-to-work programs penalize families. "In the past families seemed to have more stability. With welfare reform, more and more of our families are being forced into non-livable wage jobs and they lose access to services. For example, they lose the Oregon Health Plan, or they don't qualify for Head Start."

Back when Troser started working at Portland Impact, parents in families receiving welfare benefits were permitted to go to school for two years. "Then it was reduced to one year, then six months, then you participated in their job programs," she recalls. "They slowly reduced the educational opportunities that would have given parents the ability to find a livable wage job."

As for Troser, "building community" means that social services should be extended in a spirit of unbiased kindness: "The families we serve could easily be us, our sisters, our brothers, our daughters."

The Bee, March 2005