

Faith leaders pushing for increased government attention to human services

By Ed Langlois
OF THE SENTINEL

5038

Related editorial, page 4
Gov. Ted Kulongoski, in last week's state-of-the-state address, continued to emphasize growing the economy and job market via education, technology and transportation.

The governor gave relatively scant notice to state services for the poor.

Faith leaders noticed the lack of emphasis. They have already criticized the governor's proposed budget for its inattention to human services.

"Family-wage jobs are

definitely needed in Oregon so families can provide for themselves," says Bob Castagna, executive director of the Oregon Catholic Conference. "Until family-wage jobs are present in sufficient numbers, however, the safety net of programs protecting poor persons needs immediate

mending... Families' basic needs won't wait for family-wage jobs to arrive."

Castagna is urging lawmakers not to abandon Department of Human Services offerings such as emergency assistance and general assistance and employment-related day care in the budget.

David Leslie, executive director of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, has called for a new tax system to fund human services and schools. The governor has rejected the idea, suggesting new games to raise money through the state lottery. Leslie characterized the proposal and

the funding levels as "less than adequate, if not immoral."

Kulongoski, while speaking of hope during his Jan. 10 address to the Legislature, says he is aware of problems in the state.

SEE LEGISLATURE, PAGE 12

Legislature

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

"Too many of our citizens are still hurting," he said. "They want to work — but can't find a job. They need health insurance — but can't afford to buy it."

Kulongoski's answer is to push the creation of family-wage jobs. "When workers earn a wage that enables them to take care of themselves and their families, the majority of problems that government is asked to resolve

are reduced or go away," the governor said. "Everything from domestic violence to hunger to health care."

In recent weeks, lawmakers have heard disheartening reports about several indicators of poverty. A report from Children First for Oregon concluded that Oregon children are less safe now than a year ago. The document examines health care, education, financial stabil-

ity and safety. One in 100 Oregon children is a confirmed victim of child abuse, said the organization. Reports of child abuse or neglect increased 61 percent from 1994 to 2003. Children

First leaders had praise and criticism for Gov. Kulongoski's stated priorities. They lauded plans for bipartisan ship but decried the shrinking Oregon Health Plan and the governor's proposal to

reduce Head Start funds.

Earlier this week, the Oregon Progress Board released a study showing that the number of Oregonians without medical insurance has reached its highest level since 1992. About 17 percent of all residents — 609,000 people — lack coverage. The low point was 1996, when fewer than 350,000 were uninsured. That was at the height of the Oregon Health Plan.