

GASTON

Together For Children Comprehensive Community Plan 2008-2014



While Washington County as a whole grew by 43% in the 1990s, the population of Gaston declined by some 7% from 606 to 563. This small, rural community in western Washington County reflects its agrarian roots. Similar to the rest of the county, Gaston shows growing diversity in its population with the proportion of Latinos growing from 8.7% in 1990 to almost 17% in 2000.

Gaston has a higher proportion of youth than the county as a whole, 34.1% compared to 25.5% in 2000. While the majority of children live in a two parent household (61.2%), Gaston has the highest proportion of single parent households in the county at 38.8%.

Poverty

While per capita income in Gaston almost doubled in the 1990s, growing from \$9,319 in 1990 to \$17,758 in 2000, it remains well below that of the county as a whole (\$24,969). Similar to the county as a whole, poverty in Gaston grew during the 1990s, from 9.1% to

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11.1%. Poverty disproportionately affects children, with 21.3% of children in Gaston living in poverty in 2000. Children living in single parent households were even more likely to live in poverty (33.3%).

The percent of children participating in the free/reduced lunch program is another indicator of poverty. Since the 2000-01 school year, the percentage of children participating in the Gaston School District increased from 28.6% to 32.8% in the 2006-07 school year.

Education

Reflecting the agrarian background of the area, Gaston residents have lower educational attainment levels than other parts of the county. Almost 16% of residents over age 25 have not completed high school, compared with 11% of residents county-wide. Educational at-



tainment levels are correlated with poverty levels, and Gaston residents are significantly less likely to have a college or graduate degree than other county residents. While 36.7% of county residents had a college diploma in 2000, just 6% of Gaston residents had a four year college degree.

Test scores at the third and eighth grade levels are used as measures to determine the general school performance of children and their schools. In the Gaston School District, scores for third graders have improved in recent years and now exceed those for the state as a whole, although eighth graders' performance has declined, and they continue to perform below their peers state-wide as illustrated by the following chart.

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Third Grade	District Reading	State Reading	District Math	State Math
% meeting standards in 2001-02	77%	85%	62%	69%
% meeting standards in 2005-06	95%	90%	95%	88%
Eighth Grade	District Reading	State Reading	District Math	State Math
% meeting standards in 2001-02	70%	64%	50%	56%
% meeting standards in 2005-06	64%	68%	60%	68%

Overall, student performance has generally shown improvement , for both White and Latino students, although performance for Latino students lags behind that of their White peers, as illustrated by the following chart.

	Language Arts White	Language Arts Latino	Math White	Math Latino
% meeting / exceeding standard in 02-03	60.2%	52.9%	58.9%	62.6%
% meeting / exceeding standard in 05-06	67.6%	64.3%	68.4%	60%
% change	+12%	+21.6%	+16.7%	-4.2%

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The school drop-out rate for Gaston has shown a small increase in recent years, although it remains well below that of the county and state. The drop-out rate in Gaston increased from 1.5% in the 2000-01 school year to 2.3% in the 2005-06 school year. This compares to a county rate of 3.4% and a state rate of 4.1% for the 2005-06 school year.

Census data suggests that the school drop-out rate may be higher. In 2000, among 16-19 year olds in Gaston, 17.5% were not enrolled in school and had not graduated from high school.

Community Needs and Issues

The Commission on Children and Families has spent the last year talking with hundreds of people in communities across the county to explore the issues facing children and families. In Gaston, these conversations revealed significant concerns relating to the health and well-being of our children, youth and families. The following issues emerged in conversations with representatives from schools, social service agencies, and child care resource and referral in this area:

- Overcrowding in schools
- More children with special needs – i.e. autism
- Parents are feeling an increased level of stress in an attempt to provide for their children and families
- Communicating information is difficult in this community and this creates a lack of connectedness
- The geographical service area is very large and spread out which makes it more difficult to engage the community
- The large area encourages isolation – both voluntary and involuntary

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- Communities are small and rural, and don't have same type of participation
- There is a financial disparity between the established Gaston community and the newer members that bring a higher economic base.
- Lack of public transportation options in the rural areas makes access to resources and supports in neighboring communities such as Forest Grove and Hillsboro a challenge.

Existing Services and Supports

Conversations with the community revealed a number of strengths in the Gaston area, both in terms of the characteristics of residents and the community as well as in terms of community supports:

- School is a focal point for the community
- Parents bring a high rate of volunteerism in the schools
- Active local government with acknowledgement of issues and ability to reach out
- Community leaders acknowledge the need for agencies, civic groups, faith community and schools to work together
- There is a strong sense of local problem solving
- Good community base – open play area for youth and good after school programs

Conversations with school and community leaders in Gaston revealed that the availability of services does not meet the needs of the community which has significant access issues. Services available in Washington County, with some being targeted to Gaston residents, include:

Health

- ***Community Health Nursing*** – Washington County Health Nurses provide home visits and specialized services to new parents who have children with special medical needs. Com-

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munity health nurses help families access other health and social services

- ***Health and Developmental Screening*** – Community health nurses provide regular health and developmental screening for children with special health needs. Children who participate in Head Start/Oregon Pre-Kindergarten services also receive health and developmental screening and their families are assisted in accessing any needed services. New Parent Network/Healthy Start home visitors provide regular screening for at-risk first time parents and their babies as part of intensive home visitation services.
- ***Direct Care*** – Low cost clinics in the area include the Essential Clinic in Hillsboro, and Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center clinics in Cornelius and McMinnville.
- ***Nutrition*** – The Women Infants and Children nutrition program provides vouchers for dairy, cereal, fruit juices (and fruits/vegetables as Farmer’s Markets) for lower income pregnant women, and young children. Nutrition education is also provided through regular classes held in health clinic settings in a number of locations around the county.
- ***Outpatient Mental Health and Addiction Treatment Services*** – for children and families are available through a network of county-funded treatment providers. Services can be provided in home based settings to facilitate access to services. For children and youth experiencing serious mental health or substance abuse concerns, community treatment providers will work to assist families to access intensive community based treatment and or residential treatment services.
- ***School Based Health Center in Forest Grover*** – Forest Grove School District is exploring the possibility of providing school based health care with a health center to be located at Forest Grove High School. Qualifying Gaston students will be able to access care through this center.

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Parenting and Family Support

A number of parenting and family support services are available and are provided in the Gaston area:

- ***Family Coaching*** is a home-based skill building service for families with a child displaying high risk and/or challenging behaviors.
- ***The New Parent Network/Healthy Start program*** provides home visitation service to at-risk first time parents, providing individualized parenting education and support to assist parents in supporting their child's development and meeting their family's basic needs.
- ***Babies First*** provides community health nurse home visitation services for families who have an infant with special health needs.
- ***Family Support and Connections*** – Community outreach specialists provide families involved in Department of Human Services programs (i.e. cash assistance) who are at-risk of involvement in the child welfare system with individualized support, case management and assistance accessing community resources.

There are also a range of services available to support families from throughout the county, although there is not service capacity in Gaston. These services include:

- ***Self-Sufficiency Services*** – The Oregon Department of Human Services branch office in Tigard provides a range of services and programs for low income families, including cash assistance, food stamps, child care assistance, and Oregon Health Plan. Offices are located in Tigard, Beaverton and Hillsboro. Application materials are available at the Forest Grove Family Resource Center to facilitate families accessing services.
- ***Child Welfare*** – The Child Welfare Division of the Oregon Department of Human Services, with offices in Hillsboro

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and Beaverton, provides Child Protective Services to investigate allegations of abuse and neglect and assure safety of children, permanency planning for long term placement of children in foster care or adoptive homes, family reunification services to support children returning home, and system of care supports to provide specialized and individualized services for individualized wrap-around services to children in the Child Welfare System.

- **Homeless Shelters** – There are four shelter programs serving homeless families in the county, one shelter serving women and children leaving domestic violence situations, and one shelter serving runaway and homeless youth.
- **Court Appointed Special Advocates** – Community volunteers are recruited, trained and supported to provide advocacy, monitoring and support for children in the Child Welfare system.

Youth Development

There are limited school and community-based services to support youth success in school and provide them with constructive activities during non-school hours. Those that are available in Gaston are highlighted below, followed by some county-wide supports which can be utilized by Sherwood residents.

- **After School Activities** – There are some activities offered after school hours sponsored by the school district, including sports, academic enrichment and some activity clubs which meet seasonally (sports) or on a regular basis.
- **Public Library** –The Gaston library offers youth literacy programs and homework support. The library also offers reference assistance and access to the internet to aid students in completing school assignments.
- **Community Service** – The annual Youth Summit provides an opportunity for middle and high school student teams to submit a proposal for funds to implement a school or com-

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munity based project to improve conditions in their community.

- ***Counseling, Skill Building and Prevention Education Groups*** – Through a school counselor who is a community mental health and alcohol treatment provider, individualized and group based counseling are offered. Additionally, skill building groups, education and awareness groups may be offered in specific areas such as substance abuse, violence prevention, problem solving, etc. The Health Department has health educators who can provide education programs in school and community settings for youth and adults on a range of topics from health topics to gambling to substance use.
- ***Alternative Education / Options*** – All school districts offer alternative education options programs for students for whom a traditional education program is not meeting their needs. There is an alternative learning center for middle and high school students in Gaston.
- ***Homeless Education Services*** – Under the auspices of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act, every school district has a designated staff person who works with building staff to identify homeless students (unaccompanied older students or students living with their homeless family), and works with staff to minimize disruption to students' education, works to develop plans to maintain students in their home school, and helps them (and their families) to access needed community resources.

County-wide services which are available to youth from Gaston, generally relying on families to provide transportation if needed, include:

- ***Mentoring*** – Programs such as Big Brothers, Big Sisters can provide adult mentors to at-risk youth who would benefit.
- ***Employment and Training*** – Several organizations provide specialized employment and training services for youth. Community supports range from the State Employment Division which offers basic pre-employment training and job

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search assistance regardless of income to federally funded employment and training services including educational supports, pre-employment supports, employer based training placements, job referrals and follow-up support and assistance accessing post secondary education and training opportunities for lower income youth.

- ***Juvenile Department*** – The Juvenile Department offers a range of services for youth referred to prevent further penetration into the juvenile justice system, provide sanctions and restitution, and provide youth with opportunities to develop skills and capacities to succeed in their family, school and community.
- ***Runaway and Homeless Youth Services*** – A short term, home based shelter program has been available for runaway youth and/or youth with a mental health crisis since the late 1970s. In May, 2007 Boys and Girls Aid opened the Safe Place Shelter, located in Hillsboro, offering short term facility based shelter and transitional housing to runaway and homeless youth. Additionally there is a small transitional housing program using scatter site apartments and case management for homeless youth. The 24 hour mental health crisis line provides crisis counseling for runaways and their families, as well as access to shelter services. The Home Plate program is a community collaboration which provides an evening meal, access to showers, a movie and social recreational activity, and referral to community resources for homeless youth once a week.

School Readiness

There are limited services available in Gaston for families with young children. A brief review of countywide available for residents of Gaston is provided below.

- ***Child Care Resource and Referral*** – CCRR, operated by Community Action, provides individualized phone support

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for parents seeking child care, offering information and education in how to select care, indicators of quality, opportunities for assistance in paying cost of care, as well as referrals and information about specific child care providers in family, group home or center based settings. CCRR also provides support and training for child care providers, and works to identify providers and to build capacity in the community for underserved populations. CCRR offers workshops for child care providers on promoting early literacy through reading and other activities, and has a structured early literacy curriculum that is offered to child care providers in their home or center based setting.

- ***Child Care Division, Oregon Employment Department*** – registers and licenses child care providers in the state of Oregon assuring that minimum standards for care are met.
- ***Oregon Department of Human Services*** – administers funds to help lower income families pay for the cost of care (Employment Related Day Care)
- ***Head Start/Oregon Pre-Kindergarten*** – Oregon Child Development Coalition provides Head Start/Oregon Pre-Kindergarten services in western Washington County.
- ***New Parent Network/Healthy Start*** – provides home visitation services including parenting and child development education and support for at-risk first time parents.
- ***Early Intervention / Early Childhood Special Education*** – the Northwest Regional Education Service District provides services for young children with disabilities for children from birth to school age. Services for children birth to age three (Early Intervention) are generally provided through home visits and parent training to support children’s optimal development, while services for preschool aged children (4 and 5 year olds) are provided in program sponsored classrooms, community placements and through parent groups.
- ***Gaston Public Library*** – The public library in Gaston is open three days a week and offers homework support, Internet access and youth programs.

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- ***Health Services*** – Community health nurses provide home visits to families with a young child who has special health needs. The WIC program provides nutritional supplements and nutrition education for lower income families with young children.
- ***Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation*** – is available to provide individual consultation and assistance accessing community based mental health services for children and their families around emergent behavioral and mental health concerns as well as consultation for child care providers and other early childhood professionals to provide information and training in supporting positive social emotional development and early intervention for children displaying early signs of mental health challenges.
- ***Outpatient Mental Health Services*** – for children and families are available through a network of county-funded treatment providers. Services can be provided in home based settings to facilitate access to services.

Strategy Analysis

While there has been some growth in services available to families in Gaston in recent years, and many agencies are developing capacity to provide home based services, there continues to be a dearth of services to meet the diverse needs of the Gaston community. There is limited awareness of services which do exist, and while many services may be able to be provided in schools or at home, families must often travel to other jurisdictions to complete eligibility processes (WIC, DHS services, Head Start, etc). In addition, on a county-wide basis, service capacity has not grown quickly enough to keep pace with overall population growth which further hampers the ability of service systems to respond to the needs of underserved geographic communities.

Gaps and Barriers to Service

- **Transportation.** There is a need to expand bus and other transportation services.

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- **After School Activities.** There is a need to expand availability and variety of activities for school aged children and youth during non-school hours, including activities during school breaks and the summer months.
- **Health Care.** There is a need to facilitate access to health care for low income and uninsured children, youth and families from Gaston. Forest Grove School District is in the planning process to develop a school based health center. A partnership with Forest Grove School District will provide access to school based health care to qualifying Gaston students.
- **Head Start/Oregon Pre-Kindergarten programs, and others** could assist with access and transportation. Expansion of screening and school based health services to enhance access to early treatment.
- **Mental Health and Substance Abuse Treatment.** Expansion of school based supports for mental health, to assist in identification of children, youth with behavioral health concerns and assist them and their families to access services.
- **Community Awareness.** There is limited awareness of needs of children, youth and families and the barriers that are faced in access to services. There is limited awareness of resources and services that are available and how to access them, and how individuals and community organizations could help with access and service expansion.
- **Need to increase availability of parenting and family support services, to offer classes and individualized support to families in Sherwood, and build local capacity to support parents/families.**
- **Need to provide access to career exploration and employment options for Gaston area youth. Entrepreneurship opportunities as well as traditional employment opportunities which may be available in nearby communities.**

Potential Solutions

There are several initiatives under-way in the county which will help

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to address some of the major concerns identified in Gaston.

- Gaston community members use the Forest Grove Family Resource Center for to obtain access to OHP, child care subsidies, food stamps and other services for lower income families for whom transportation to an office is a barrier. Parenting classes and other supports are offered through the FRC.
- The NW Regional Education Service District is facilitating a collaborative effort to develop and implement systems to improve access to school and community mental health treatment supports for students. The collaboration involves all school districts, the County Mental Health Organization, the Juvenile Department, community behavioral health treatment providers and the Commission on Children and Families. To date, results of the initiative have included development of district and county-wide, cross-district crisis response protocols, training of district staff and mental health treatment staff in evidence-based practices to enhance identification, treatment and support of students with behavioral health concerns, and development of a guide for school staff to the county mental health system and services.
- In order to help facilitate access to needed health care, a county-wide initiative to enroll all eligible children in the Oregon Health Plan is being under-taken. In the Gaston area, there were 102 children under the age of 18 enrolled in the Oregon Health Plan in 2006.

Conversations with school and community leaders in Gaston also revealed a number of strategies that could be under-taken in the community to help address concerns identified. Potential strategies discussed included:

- Expansion of after school and summer activities for children and youth to include non-sports activities as well.
- Expand community mental health support
- Provide affordable housing information

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- Help more families get enrolled in the Oregon Health Plan
- Help the schools identify different learning styles and develop strategies to address individual needs
- Create new community building events
- Develop and improve on the communication methods between communities
- Satellite agency branches could be established in the Gaston community to increase accessibility.
- Increase awareness of resources for families by updating school counselors and administrators on a regular basis about available options and access methods.
- Continue the collaboration among county mental health, juvenile justice, child welfare and agencies such as Youth Contact and LifeWorks.
- Create a community center or community school where activities can be offered for children, youth, families, seniors that could host events, parks and recreation kinds of classes and activities, computer lab, kitchen facility, etc. This has consistently been identified as a need.
- Work with Ride Connection to expand transportation options for residents.
- Develop new community events to build sense of community and help integrate newer residents.

