

710 East Main Street
West Plains, MO 65775

Phone: 417-256-6147
Fax: 417-256-7318
Email: askme@oaiwp.org

Investing in families in Douglas, Howell,
Oregon, Ozark, Texas, and Wright
Counties in Missouri.

We're on the Web!
www.oaiwp.org



Ozark Action, Inc.
710 East Main Street
West Plains, MO 65775

News Continued...

Budget Reduced but Quality Stays

The Head Start continuation grant application for fiscal year 2006/2007 is completed. Our budget for this grant was reduced by \$34,100 by the Head Start Bureau. This is our loss under the nationwide funding cut to Head Start. The changes we made in our program last year to lower expenses should suffice to enable us to absorb this loss without any changes to the number of children we serve or a lessening in the quality of our classroom activities.

PBS will Enhance Staff Skills

Our program is planning to adopt a staff training curriculum next year entitled Positive Behavior Support (PBS). This is a program to enhance staff skill in serving children and families of children with disabilities and behavior challenges. PBS was first piloted about four years ago. Directors from programs that have already initiated PBS have been very enthusiastic about the results they have witnessed. On March 27th a person from the Region VII Training and Technical Assistance Team will meet with us to explain PBS in more detail and help us to start planning steps to implement it next year.

OZARK ACTION, INC.
A COMMUNITY ACTION AGENCY

A Hand Up

Tax Assistance Program Reaping Rewards

With two weeks to go, OAI's expanded Tax Assistance Program is a great success. Two-hundred fifty-five families have been assisted with filing their income taxes so far, and claiming the Earned Income Tax Credit, or the Child Tax Credit, both of which result in additional money to low-income working families on top of what their normal refund would be.

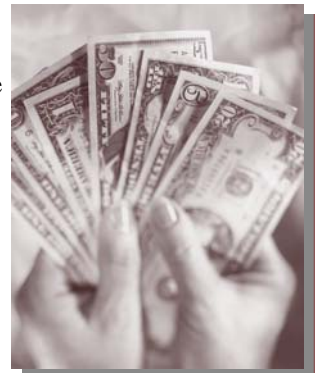
The project's manager, Sue Lawson, based in our Houston office, has trained Paula Miller, and Martha Millard, Community Services staff at Alton and Mtn. Grove, to do the Federal and State Taxes and make the tax credit claims. She also trained Lisa Vigdal, who began helping with taxes when her usual Energy Assistance responsibilities began to drop off. Jimmy Tidwell of the Fiscal Department, volunteered after hours to help in West Plains. We also had two community volunteers, Shalawn Lawrence at our Hartville office, and Nancy Hardenberg at our Houston office.

The total additional income from EITC for these families is \$420,028 so far, or about \$1,640 per household. For a low income family, this is a significant windfall. According to the IRS there are over four times that amount families could claim in our service area, and don't.

For one recipient this year, the assistance was especially useful. A mother of three working as a CNA at an area nursing home, had been receiving rent assistance for several years through the Section 8 Housing program. After computing her taxes, she was eligible for \$4,400 from the Earned Income Tax Credit. She was thrilled to be able to use the refund to make a down payment on buying her first home. From now on her housing payments will be building equity for her.

This year OAI expanded our tax assistance efforts to include the Missouri Property Tax Rebate. Elderly and disabled people are eligible for a portion of their property tax, or rent paid as a rebate from the State. This has been done for years by volunteers at the area senior citizens centers. "We decided to add this to our effort because we had a hunch that if people didn't go to those centers, they might not even know about the rebate" said Paul Clark, Community Services Director. That hunch was correct. All the community services staff received training in the relatively simple process, and we began promoting it to potentially eligible people. To date we have assisted 192 households claim the rebate. The total brought back to these households has been \$114,283 – an average of more than \$543 per household. There is more to the story, for those who had not been claiming the rebate when they could have, and who have the necessary information to make the claim, can go back four years. Forty three of the households were able to claim the rebate four years prior. One hundred nine of the 301 rebate forms completed so far have been for previous unclaimed years.

Many people have been completely surprised and very pleased that they had this money coming to them. These individuals have helped to spread the word. Unlike income taxes, which end for the most part by April 15th, the property tax rebate has no filing deadline, so OAI staff will continue to inform people, and prepare the rebate forms for those who are eligible and haven't filed.



Inside this issue:

Agency Events

Community Services

Head Start

Housing & Weatherization

Staff News and Events

Workforce Development

Our Mission

The Mission of Ozark Action, Inc. is to coordinate and provide services for people with needs so they can improve their quality of life.



The Community Services staff listens and responds to immediate needs and opens the doors to agency programs, encouraging and supporting a desire to change and grow for individual families and our communities.

Untapped Service...

No one considers telephone service a luxury in today's fast-paced world. A telephone is a vital lifeline to emergency help and healthcare. There are programs available in Missouri to help low-income and disabled individuals receive discounts on their monthly local phone service and installation charges. However, many people have not tapped into this resource or may not be aware that these programs exist.

These State and Federal support programs can help by offering qualified people a discount on their monthly local telephone bill. Low-income individuals can receive a discount of as much as \$13.50 per month depending on your local phone company. For someone disabled discounts as much as \$3.50 per month depending on your local phone company.

The Link-up program will allow qualified low income individuals up to as much as a 50% reduction (up to \$30) on initial telephone connection charges.

If you have questions about the program, about the Missouri Universal Service Fund, the Board, or the Missouri Public Service Commission, please call 573-751-4221 or the PSC's Public Information Office at 573-751-9300. You can also call your local phone company or visit the Public Service Commission website at www.psc.mo.gov.

You may be eligible if you participate in any of these programs:

- Food stamps
- Medicaid
- Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)
- Temporary Assistance to Needy Families Program (TANF)
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
- Federal Public Housing Assistance
- National School Lunch Programs'
- Free Lunch Program
- Disabled Benefits



New System Moves Ahead

OAI is one of four Missouri Community Action Programs that began piloting the new client data system in early February. Paula Miller has been using it at the Alton Office. All those pioneering its use for the first time with clients have been a critical help to further improve the system and reduce bugs found in the first two months. We are awaiting the latest release, which combines all of these fixes into a final product. That is now expected to be in place by April 10th. Training of other Community Services staff will then proceed, and by the end of April all should be on board with the new system.

The Head Start component of the system, replacing Child Plus, and which needed little further development, is expected to be added in the near future. Training of Head Start staff users will then take place.

The new system will tie together client data, programs, and outcomes across much of the agency – all in one place for the first time. The addition of further agency programs to the system is expected later. The MIS project has been four years in the making. The result will tie not only agencies together, but also all the CAA's in the State. By late summer it will be in use statewide.



Head Start provides a pre-school learning experience for three and Four-year old children from economically disadvantaged families and children with disabilities.

Lots of Excitement and News for Thayer Head Start

The Thayer Head Start program will be moving to a new site for the next school year. The new site will be in the former elementary school building. Children will have access to a large gymnasium for indoor play during inclement weather. There will be ample parking and much more room in the new playground. Since the children will have direct access to the playground from the classroom, this site will also be much safer for them. Classroom space will be larger and more open than is available in the current location. This will enable staff to easily define and monitor play areas.

Felicia Smith is the new teacher at the Thayer Center. She was promoted from a parent/teacher aid position in Alton to the Thayer teacher position after Sarah Alexander resigned to return to her former employment with another Head Start program.

Child Resource & Referral visited the center to do a pre-accreditation review assessment. *The person doing the review said that the rating she gave the Thayer Center was the highest rating she had ever given a program.* She was extremely impressed with the job performance of the Thayer staff. We are very proud of them!



Learning Libraries from First Book

Funai and Disney joined together to provide new learning libraries to every Head Start program in the nation via First Book, a non-profit literacy organization. Ozark Action, Inc. received a VCR/TV and \$286 worth of educational videos this past week. The videos include Disney characters such as Mickey Mouse and Winnie the Pooh. We have applied to receive a portion of additional free books being delivered to St. Louis. A volunteer will be picking up the books for us, so we will not even have to pay postage for them.

Housing Choice Voucher Eligibility

A new law, enacted as part of HUD's Fiscal Year 2006 appropriations, makes significant changes to the eligibility criteria for the Housing Choice Voucher Program. In general the new regulations restrict individuals enrolled in an institution of higher education and who meet certain other requirements from receiving assistance under section 8 of the U.S. Housing Act of 1937. The new law is intended to address recent incidents of college students obtaining federal housing assistance without their educational financial assistance counting as income. Specifically, Section 327 of Public Law 109-115 provides that:

- 1) No assistance shall be provided under Section 8 of the United States Housing Act of 1937 to any individual who:
 - Is enrolled as a student at an institution of higher education;
 - Is under 24 years of age;
 - Is not a veteran;
 - Is unmarried;
 - Does not have a dependent child; and
 - Is not otherwise individually eligible, or has parents who, individually or jointly, are not eligible, to receive assistance under section 8.
- 2) For purposes of determining the eligibility of a person to receive assistance under section 8 of the U.S Housing Act of 1937, any financial assistance (in excess of amounts received for tuition) that an individual receives under the Higher Education Act of 1965, from private sources, or an institution of higher education, shall be considered income to that individual, except for a person over the age of 23 with dependent children.

In addition to impacting the eligibility of new applicants, this law also impacts current participants. The Housing Department has revised the initial application and the annual recertification documents to collect this new information. We are currently recertifying all participant households where this could impact their continued eligibility and/or rental assistance amount.



Weatherization reduces the average annual heating cost by \$300 per household.

Through OAI's Housing program 500+ families are assisted with rental assistance.

Until...there are no more hungry children... and every adult who wants a job, has a job... and each family has a safe and affordable home...the work must continue!



Job training and employment rank among the highest needs in OAI's needs assessment. OAI aggressively addresses this final step towards individual and family economic self-sufficiency.