

CREATIVE FUNDING KEEPS BIENESTAR AFLOAT

When Housing Development Corporation of Northwest Oregon gave itself an extreme makeover, it made creative connections that improved its efforts to offer affordable housing to farmworkers.

In 2007, after the longtime directors of the 27-year-old Hillsboro-based nonprofit moved away, board members hired a new director, Karen Shawcross, and started strategic planning.

One of their first decisions was to change the name. Any nonprofit with the words "Development" and "Corporation" in its name "didn't sound like anything that needed money," Shawcross said.

They chose "Bienestar," Spanish for "well-being."

They increased the size of the board from 11 to 16 and successfully pressed for contributions from 100 percent of the board and staff, a rate that impresses donors.

To do that, they welcomed even small donations and became more open about giving, listing all donors in the annual report. "Peer pressure is a wonderful thing," said Shawcross.

They started using house parties and direct mail to increase individual giving.

They also quadrupled their grant writing, applying for 82 grants in 2008-09, with 27 approved and 25 pending.

These included small requests and donors not immediately associated with affordable housing.

The Hardy Plant Society of Oregon, for example, is helping to pay for community gardens. The Washington County Arts, Heritage and Humanities Coalition is helping a Bienestar resident paint a mural at Sunset Gardens apartments in Hillsboro. The Chalkboard Project is helping resident parents work more effectively with their children's schools.

Such funding diversity is keeping Bienestar afloat during the recession and housing crisis. While developer fees — Bienestar's traditional funding source — dropped by about 40 percent this past year, individual giving quintupled.

Without that extra help, "we would have just crashed," said Shawcross, noting that Tualatin Valley Housing Partners, one of the three affordable-housing nonprofits in Washington County, announced last week that it was closing.

Meanwhile, Bienestar residents are exploring a burst of new programs, including adult classes in English as a Second Language, financial literacy and computers, as well as clubs for children in science, basketball, homework, art and reading.