

Local social justice advocate seeks change

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By KIRSTEN GIBSON City Editor

A Lafayette community member has seen the elderly have to choose between heating their homes or feeding themselves.

Patti O'Callaghan repeats that story to the numerous legislators she lobbies on behalf of poor and hungry people. O'Callaghan works as the director of social justice at the Lafayette Urban Ministry, where she celebrated her 10-year anniversary in September.

In honor of National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week, O'Callaghan is going to give a presentation today about the legislative issues surrounding hunger and homelessness.

O'Callaghan comes from a background of helping people. She started as a court-appointed special advocate for abused or neglected children. According to Joyce Fasani, the shelter's director, when O'Callaghan started, there were only five volunteer advocates but when she left, there were more than 100.

"She never rests," Fasani said. "She's not afraid to ask for what she wants."

And O'Callaghan has to ask. As a registered lobbyist for low-income families, it's not easy getting the legislators' attention.

"(The legislators) say, 'But that will cost money. Where is the money coming from?'" O'Callaghan said. "They want us to ascertain what things to cut in order to get the thing we want.

"But as human service agencies, we don't want to be fighting over pieces of the pie – we think the pie should be bigger."

O'Callaghan's sentiments are in line with the Occupy Wall Street protesters. She sees the "undue influence" corporation lobbyists get on the federal level, the large income disparity and the poor and hungry people she works with every day.

"We're not talking about socialism or anything like that," O'Callaghan said. "What's the morally correct thing, to lift up the poor and hungry, is also what's good for the economy."

O'Callaghan said that there are many programs that help the poor and hungry on the federal and state levels that are on the verge of getting cut, and she can't let that happen.

"Fifty-eight percent of unemployed Hoosiers have run out of unemployment insurance," O'Callaghan said. "They really depend on things like food stamps." Food stamps are something on the verge of being cut.