



November 30, 2008

Service agencies try to keep up with requests for help

By *MORGAN DAY*
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LANCASTER - A record number of people are seeking assistance from the government and local private organizations, which are having money and resource problems of their own.

Fairfield County Job & Family Services, for one, has experienced a 67-percent increase in new individuals applying for assistance from July through October, compared to same time in 2007, said Laura Holton, Community Services director at Job & Family Services.

"The issues facing families are monumental, and we're struggling to find the time and find the resources to help these struggling families," Holton said.

The surge in assistance requests comes at a time when the department is straining to keep up with a 5 percent budget cut and another anticipated round of cuts in January.

She said Community Services, which assists families with children and single adults able to work, reports a spike in numbers across the board. That's an increase in need for financial assistance, transportation services, food and emergency assistance.

Other local organizations, such as the Salvation Army in Lancaster, are working to keep up with the influx of families in need as well.

Salvation Army Capt. Linda Ward said more people than ever are seeking assistance from the agency. It was especially apparent when families applied for Christmas Assistance program, in which the Salvation Army gives 125 families food and toys for the holidays. Those services reach about 400 children.

Slots for the program normally fill within three days, but the organization received 125 applications within six hours this year, Ward said.

They decided to accept an additional 50 families to help 175 families.

"We turned away 20 to 30 families," she said. "We told them they would have to find a resource somewhere else in community."

Holton said JFS has had to deny services, too, because there simply aren't enough people on staff to handle the large number of cases. However, they make an effort to refer everyone to a specific alternative.

Still, those turned down are upset, and rightfully so, Holton said.

"I try to tell (the case workers) they're not angry with you," she said. "They're angry. They're hurting. They're desperate. And that's hard."

Holton's department handles 10,000 of the agency's 14,000 calls a month. A case worker handle 25 calls a day.

The agency also consults with those who apply for assistance within five days, whereas the state requires 10 days. Holton said JFS soon might have to expand their timeframe to process more calls.

Ward said the Salvation Army also sees more new families and individuals who never have sought assistance there before.

Previous years brought in many elderly residents. But now families and single moms are seeking more assistance, she said.

"It's rough. It really is," Ward said. "I would say when we came to Lancaster five years ago, we had a lot of single men drifting (through), that sort of thing. Now we see a lot of moms with kids whose families are just going through a really hard time."

Holton said more men and families are going to JFS for help. Some have been evicted from their homes. And many have been laid off and haven't been able to find more work.

St. Vincent DePaul in Lancaster, a church-run nonprofit aimed at helping families, has helped more residents pay their utility and electric bills this year.

Eight to 10 applications had been coming in each day, but it has slowed since Lancaster-Fairfield Community Action Agency's Home Energy Assistance Program which started Nov. 3. That program has helped 570 households since then, officials said.

Still, St. Vincent DePaul manager Lori Getz keeps positive thoughts about those families struggling right now.

"The good thing is there are more agencies out there pulling together to help these people."

Additional Facts

How to Get Help

Here is a list of agencies in Lancaster and Fairfield County that offer assistance to families and individuals in financial need:

- **Lancaster-Fairfield Community Action Agency:** 740-653-4146
 - **Salvation Army:** 740-687-1921
 - **St. Vincent De Paul:** 740-653-6037
 - **United Way of Fairfield County:** 740-653-0643
 - **Job & Family Services:** 740-653-1701
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