

Social workers also feeling pressure of job losses

County agencies laying off staffers even as rolls of needy grow

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Some public employees who help the poor deal with Ohio's faltering economy are themselves finding out what life is like without a job.

Workers in county departments of Job and Family Services are losing their positions amid a series of state-funding cuts totaling \$44.4 million since July 1.

Those still on the job are working harder than ever, their bosses say, to keep up with the growing demand for health care, food stamps and cash assistance.

County directors worry that more bad news awaits in the next state budget, and they fret that they might have to idle more workers, resulting in delays in helping the needy.

The Cuyahoga and Hamilton county agencies are laying off more than 300 workers each, and even smaller counties, such as Union and Madison, have not been immune. Franklin County has held out against cutting jobs.

"It's desperate," said Joel Potts, executive director of the Ohio Job and Family Services Directors' Association. "Every county we're aware of is making massive changes to cut costs."

Jack Frech, director of the Athens County Department of Job and Family Services, handed pink slips last week to six of his employees in health- and administrative-related jobs.

As part of his plan to fill a \$350,000 budget hole, Frech also junked a program that helped those in poverty repair their vehicles to drive to distant jobs. The cuts follow previous reductions totaling more than \$1 million.

"At this point, we're trying to protect our basic, main services" by reducing assistance to the poor that's not required, he said.

Frech said his remaining workers are paddling hard to keep up with the growing need for public assistance. The county, with a population of 63,275, has 1,600 people receiving cash assistance, 11,000 on Medicaid and 8,000 receiving food stamps.

Randy Cochrane, director of Muskingum County Job and Family Services, agreed that the workload is piling up on fewer workers. "Every month is a new record," he said of the numbers seeking welfare assistance. More than one in six county residents - 15,000 of 85,000 - receives food stamps.

Meanwhile, the agency laid off five employees in October and fears that it might have another round of staff cuts as state aid dwindles, Cochrane said. Contract concessions might be sought from unionized employees. His agency has not been filing vacancies and has 24 fewer workers than a few years ago.

Fairfield County Job and Family Services has avoided layoffs with voluntary reductions in work hours. Some of the 220 employees are working 35 hours instead of 40 for less pay; others are taking days or weeks of unpaid leave. A number of job openings have gone unfilled, said the agency's Rich Bowlen.

In Licking County, Director John Fisher said that only extra cash from the county has kept all workers on board. He met with his staff Tuesday to express concern. "With the uncertainty of the state budget, we're taking it a day at a time," he said.

Although his agency still is meeting the state mandate to make a determination on applications for assistance within 30 days, the number of people in search of help is lengthening how quickly they obtain aid, Fisher said.

"In the past, we were seeing anywhere from 20 to 35 applications a day for assistance. Now we're seeing 50 to 70 a day," he said.

Dispatch reporter *Mary Beth Lane* contributed to this story.

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