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Number of homeless calling 2-1-1 line doubles

BY SARA B. HANSEN

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A quarterly report shows the number of homeless people calling United Way of Larimer County's 2-1-1 service more than doubled between July and October this year compared with the same months in 2008. The situation has become so dire, that sometimes the United Way's Sister Mary Alice Murphy Center for Hope can do nothing more than offer people gear to help them survive on the street.

Zach Penland, program supervisor for the Center for Hope, said there are limited options right now.

"Unfortunately there are a lot of folks, both singles and families who just have nowhere to go at night right now. They don't have shelter and the shelters are just overwhelmed," Penland said. "There's been a real pinch in terms of the funding available for these programs right now. A lot of the funders, who provided us with grant money in the past, have less money to give."

Penland said the center, which opened in March, serves an average of 85 people each day. The center's goal is to try to help people stay in their homes and provide counseling. It does not serve as a shelter. The center anticipated serving 30 people per day and the average has been more than double that. In one day, Penland said the center served 131 people.

"It's been tough to handle that high volume," Penland said. "Day in, day out, it's been tough. I hate having to look someone in the eye and say, 'I'm sorry, we don't have a solution for you. We'll keep working on it.'"

United Way of Larimer County's 2-1-1 phone helps connect people with resources to find assistance with food, clothing, rent, shelter, support groups, parenting information, volunteerism and other community services in Larimer County.

In 2008, 68 homeless people called 2-1-1 for help between July and October. This year, the number jumped to 147 during the same time period.

Tracy Hays, United Way 2-1-1 director, said the 116 percent increase in callers shows the affect of the economy on the Fort Collins area.

Gordan Thibedeau, president and CEO of United Way of Larimer County, said the numbers "represent a small sampling of those who are newly homeless and do not know where to turn. They are the hidden homeless."

Thibedeau points out the number of chronically homeless people is not increasing. He said United Way and other nonprofit organizations are working to help the homeless people who have lost their jobs and in turn their homes.

"Once someone falls into this level of poverty, it's very difficult for them to get back on track," he said.

According to the United Way data, 59 percent of the calls came from Fort Collins, 34 percent from Loveland and 1 percent from Wellington. The majority of the callers were women between the ages of 18 and 59.

Penland said more women have lost their jobs in the past few months.

"Some of the stats in the initial wave showed more men were losing their jobs than women, but in the second wave, we've been seeing more women have been hit."

The financial stresses of sending children back to school and preparing for the holidays also can highlight their financial difficulties.

"There are additional expenses with school. They get supplies and clothes and there's less money for them to buy food and pay for rent," Penland said.

The colder temperatures also can drive more women to seek help.

Additional Facts

Want to help?

United Way of Larimer County coordinates the strength of more than 8,000 individual donors, 500 local businesses, 200 nonprofit organizations and numerous community resources. Donations are used to help support the Community Impact Fund, which helps struggling families and individuals with immediate needs and the resources to improve their lives into the future, and the Bridging the Gap Fund, which supports long-term community change through initiatives like Pathways Past Poverty, and help people become financially stable by removing barriers and providing opportunities.

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