

Requests for help rise as nonprofits struggle.txt

Requests for help rise as nonprofits struggle

Wednesday, November 19

News & Record

By Donald W. Patterson

Staff Writer

GREENSBORO - Craig Thomas' voice cracked as she described the problems.

Homeless families sleeping in their cars.

Elderly residents facing the onset of cold weather without electricity.

Unemployed people who can't pay their bills.

"Since March, with the downturn in the economy, the needs have become desperate," said Thomas, executive director of Mary's House, one of the nonprofits in Greensboro that provides emergency assistance to the needy. "It is almost like the floodgates have opened. We have always had requests, but it has never been like this."

It's the same story at the Salvation Army and the Greensboro Urban Ministry. Requests for help have skyrocketed while funds to meet those needs have declined.

At Mary's House on Guilford Avenue, applications for assistance have jumped 100 percent since October of last year. During that time, as donations have declined, the average gift has dropped from \$80 per family to \$50.

"That doesn't include the people we denied (assistance)," Thomas said. "I have another 15 or 20 that we couldn't help. They owed too much money."

At the Urban Ministry on West Lee Street, the lobby stays full with people seeking assistance.

"We have been slammed," said the Rev. Mike Aiken, the agency's executive director. "I have been involved with Urban Ministry for 30 years and this is the worst I have ever seen."

On Tuesday, the Urban Ministry's clients included Devon Cummings, 33, an unemployed single mother with disabled twin boys, age 5.

When Cummings didn't get all of her monthly child support payment, it threw her budget out of balance and her electricity was turned off.

She turned to Urban Ministry for help on her \$342 power bill.

"Without them, I don't know what I would have done," Cummings said. "I probably would have had a nervous breakdown."

Agencies like Urban Ministry, Mary's House and the Salvation Army help people with food, clothing, emergency housing and financial assistance with utility bills.

But in recent months, the agencies say, they have encountered an increase in requests from the working poor and families facing foreclosure.

"It's not (just) the chronic poor that we are dealing with," said Maj. Paul Egan, corps officer at the Salvation Army. "The face of the poor is changing. Now, you have to put a 5-year-old kid in your mind with a mom that is struggling."

It's the same at the Urban Ministry, where Aiken has had to create a waiting list

Requests for help rise as nonprofits struggle.txt
for people who need emergency housing.

"We thought it was terrible last year when we had 20 on the waiting list," Aiken said. "Now, we have 50."

At the Salvation Army, requests for food have doubled in the past year, rising from 176 in October 2007 to 359 this year.

The demand for clothing also has jumped. In the first six months of 2008, the Salvation Army gave out about 660 pieces of clothing, but in the past four months, that number has increased to more than 1,000. Requests for energy assistance have risen 42 percent over last year.

Like the families they are trying to help, nonprofits have seen their budgets slashed by the economic crisis.

During the first 10 months of this year, contributions to the Salvation Army have declined about 20 percent, or \$40,000.

"What the economy is doing is putting a toll on people's households," Egan said. "If there ever was a time when people need the Salvation Army, it is right now. And if there was ever a time when the Salvation Army needs this community to support it, it is right now. We want to be able to support those in need."

Asked if the local Salvation Army would have enough assistance funds to meet needs throughout the year, Egan said, "I don't know, man. I hope so."

Contact Donald W. Patterson at 373-7027 or don.patterson@news-record.com