

Recovery slow for the neediest

Calls in county for shelter, food, clothes remain high

by Margie Hyslop | Staff writer | November 17, 2010

Sluggishness in the economic recovery is obvious at homeless shelters as well as at free food and clothes distribution centers in Montgomery County, officials and aid workers said this week.

Much of the increased need for free housing, food and shelter came two years ago and has remained.

On Nov. 14 there were 325 homeless single men and women in the county, compared to 316 on the same date in 2009. Although the increase in the number of homeless persons seems slight, the depth of the problem, in several ways, has grown, county and nonprofit officials said.

More people are seeking shelter from domestic violence, said Kim M. Ball, administrator for homeless services for the county. From July through September, the county housed 65 persons fleeing abuse — eight shy, in one quarter, of the 73 persons the county sheltered from abuse in the preceding 12 months.

More younger adults, aged 19 to 23, are being "put out" of homes in which they lived, often citing "overcrowding," Ball said.

More of the homeless formerly were working middle class, said nonprofit workers who run the shelters.

"Although we have always had men with cars, we are having more men with cars and laptop [computers]," said Julie Maltzman, deputy director at the Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless, a nonprofit organization that runs several men's shelters, including one on East Gude Drive, in Rockville.

The average length of stay for the roughly 800 men the coalition shelters each year has increased from about 35 days to 45 days, Maltzman said.

The story is similar for homeless women, said Barbara Garlock, interim executive director for Interfaith Works, which runs shelters for women on Wilkins Avenue in Rockville.

"Most of the last two years there has not been one empty bed any night," Garlock said. Of the women sheltered there, "many still have a car and a job," she added.

The adjustment can be rough for women who are unused to a dormitory-like setting. Sometimes beds have had to be rearranged because of bullying, Garlock said.

While the number of homeless individuals and families in the county is relatively stable, that stability largely is due to increased placement of formerly homeless people in subsidized permanent housing over the last two years, Coalition executive director Sharan London said.

Expenses have exceeded increases in funding that county and federal governments have been able to provide, Garlock said, adding that shelters have had to do more with less. Small spending increases have paid for more case managers, who were needed, Ball said.

However, the size of families seeking shelter has grown, with more two-parent families entering the system and the average size of the family up from 3.2 members last year to 3.5 now, Ball said.

The number of people receiving food from Manna Food Center — which requires a referral from the county's Department of Health and Human Services in order for clients to pick up groceries once per-month — also has increased, said executive director Kim Damion.

Manna provided nearly 285,000 weekend meals and 95,000 snacks to Montgomery County children through a program that provides backpacks and fills them with food each Friday at county schools. The program is more than four times the size it was when it began in 2008.

In October 3,207 families received food from Manna, up from 3,198 in October 2009 and 3,124 in October 2008.

Manna has added one Saturday distribution per month to the five-day-a-week schedule at its Gaithersburg warehouse. The Saturday distribution was added to serve people who, because of work or transportation, have difficulty picking up food on weekdays.

The first Manna Saturday distribution in October drew 37 families, while the November distribution drew 60, most of who had never come to the free food warehouse before, Damion said.

In the past year, 35 percent more people turned to Interfaith Works for free clothing, bedding and household goods, Garlock said. Cutting its clothing center sites from two to one has been a hardship for clients who used to go to the Gaithersburg center, which closed July 1 to save costs, she said.

About half of clients who came to the clothing center in Gaithersburg have come to the remaining center in Twinbrook, Garlock said.