

Louisville, Kentucky: sharp rise in emergency food requests

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The 2004 Conference of Mayors' recently issued Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness tracks 27 major US cities and further confirms that state budgets are straining to compensate for the crumbling economy with social services. Nationally, requests for emergency food and housing rose dramatically, with over a fifth of all those in need turned away for lack of resources. Well over half of those seeking assistance were families, and over a third of the adults were employed.

Unemployment and other employment-related problems were ranked by those service providers surveyed as the prime causes of hunger and homelessness, followed by low-paying jobs, high housing costs, mental illness or substance abuse without access to care, and poverty or lack of income. Perhaps most troubling is the proportion of families now seeking homeless services—56 percent of all requests.

Louisville, Kentucky, while not as large a city as some of those profiled, reported a marked increase in requests for emergency food assistance from 2003, as well as an inability to meet the need for emergency shelter due to program cuts at the state and federal levels. The demographics of its homeless population are as close to an accurate representation of the region as possible considering that most of the state is dependent on the charity of churches for homeless services, and Cincinnati, Ohio, where many homeless Kentuckians migrate, did not participate in the survey.

The Louisville Metro area, Kentuckiana, also witnessed both a 70 percent increase in the price of natural gas and a 71 percent increase in home foreclosures, no small coincidence considering that, according to the Coalition for the Homeless, 40 percent of this year's homeless lost their homes because they lost their jobs. The Conference of Mayors report presents the figure in somewhat different terms, estimating that 28 percent became homeless due to job loss. The impact, however, is the

same. Beyond that segment of the homeless population, another 26 percent were working even while they lost their homes, and nearly 10 percent of those staying in local shelters said they had a college education.

New agencies, food pantries, and after-school and community-based feeding programs have grown 30 percent this year in Kentucky, in part because the upsurge in homelessness was anticipated. Louisville, in particular, has seen an exodus of industry, with at least two more major employers scheduled to leave before the year's end. DuPont and Fischer Packing have recently relocated away from the city citing expenses, despite Kentucky's ranking by *Forbes* magazine as among "the most competitive" states—second behind Indiana in economic development—in addition to state-funded industry incentives: "The Horse Capital of the World has the second-lowest business costs, after Albuquerque, NM, of any area with a population greater than 200,000, and they're 19 percent below the national average."

Louisville's shelters have seen more than twice the national average increase in food assistance requests, 32 percent, with a rise of more than 18 percent in the distribution of baby formula. Hospitals are now pointing parents toward food pantries, although donations from last year are down, partly because corporate sponsors have pulled their support. Thirty-seven percent of those requesting assistance are turned away for lack of resources. Families are financially at a loss for food after managing to meet the demands for other monthly expenses.

As for shelter, according to one city official, "There is a waiting list of over 13,000 households for Section 8 housing and limited Shelter Plus Care slots. There are no Public Housing units available," which accounts for the anomalous 25 percent decrease in Louisville for family housing requests as compared to the national average increase of 68 percent. It is well known in the state that

the waiting list is years old; many homeless Kentuckians have been so for longer than a year, even gaining employment while sleeping in shelters.

A third of the people living in Louisville's shelters are working, with an average hourly wage of \$6.30. With this wage, one would need to work 87 hours a week to meet the rent rate for a modest apartment. The disparity is not isolated to the working homeless. Twelve percent of Louisville's population lives below the poverty line, and one in twenty-four children enrolled in the Jefferson County public school system is homeless.

Since Bill Clinton signed into law the 1996 welfare-to-work "reform," the number of families receiving public assistance in Kentucky has been reduced by more than half, with work requirements stiffened and benefits reduced—the maximum monthly cash assistance allowance for a single mother of two is \$262.

Candace, a Louisville woman who had been working out of a shelter and managed to secure an apartment, was paying \$160 a month for daycare for her two toddlers so that she could fulfill the welfare stipulations of full-time employment. Her job was an hour from home each way on the neglected public bus line. At the end of the month, she had \$52 to tide them over until, and if, her application for food stamps was approved. "What I hate most is that I'm not really there for my kids," she said. "I'm there for them physically, but I'm so tired that I'm not there mentally."

Contrary to the stereotypes of the homeless as mentally ill or drug-addicted men, most homeless in Kentucky are young mothers, elderly women and unaccompanied children. A 10-year-old Louisville boy explained, "We're not bums. We're just regular people going through a rough time." The situation is expected to worsen in the coming year as the state budget is further skewed toward "growth stimulation" of industry and tax cuts for the super-rich at the expense of basic social insurance.



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