

Atlanta homeless shelters strain under economic crisis

Naomi Spencer
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As the economic crisis deepens, Atlanta, Georgia, emergency providers are straining to accommodate more than 7,000 homeless people, including many newly homeless families.

Along with rising unemployment and a growing number of home foreclosures across the US, the homeless population is swelling far beyond the capacity of emergency facilities. Urban centers have felt the impact most sharply, with service organizations facing budget cuts at the same time that thousands are thrust into poverty and foreclosure.

According to an October 12 report in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Atlanta's Salvation Army cannot open a nearly completed homeless shelter for families because of a lack of funds. Similarly, the city's Midtown Assistance Center, an agency providing emergency financial assistance, announced in August that it had spent twice its monthly \$24,000 budget on aid in the month of July. The agency assists employed workers and those in job training who do not receive public assistance.

Another area service provider, MUST Ministries, reported that it aided 29,000 people last year, and requests for assistance are up 25 percent this year. Annette Lee, MUST Ministries' resource development coordinator, commented to the *Journal-Constitution* of September 29: "It's no longer just hourly wage workers. These are professionals—from bankers to people with masters and PhD's.... We are seeing more and more people who are above the poverty line."

Metro Atlanta has lost nearly 143,000 payroll jobs in the past year, according to the most recent Labor Department figures, and well over a quarter million workers are unemployed in the city. Foreclosure filings have surged, with more than 97,000 foreclosure notices served in the metro area so far this year, up from the

already high 79,400 in 2008.

According to Census Bureau data released in September, nearly 26,000 metro Atlanta families fell below the poverty line in 2008—before the sharp economic decline of 2009—representing an increase of 19 percent over 2007.

The Metro Atlanta Task Force for the Homeless, a large walk-in shelter downtown, is now serving more than 700 people each night and anticipating far higher numbers as the weather turns colder. The Task Force is often the only emergency shelter open to men, after other city shelters fill with families.

According to employees, the shelter has come under attack from a local business group, Central Atlanta Progress (CAP), which wants the agency closed. The Task Force filed a lawsuit in July against CAP and members of city government on charges of harassment and interference. According to the lawsuit, the city refused to issue certifications to the Task Force that would have allowed the group to obtain government funds, despite the agency's compliance with city requirements.

The shelter has also had its water shut off by the city twice in the past year without explanation. CAP officials have publicly expressed the opinion that the shelter breeds crime and encourages laziness among the homeless population. In September, the city petitioned to have the Task Force's lawsuit dismissed. That petition was denied by Fulton County Superior Court.

According to Anita Beaty, director of the Task Force, more than three-quarters of the people who sleep at the shelter earn a living during the day, but not enough to afford rent in the city.

"Atlanta has been trying to hide poverty so they attack us for keeping poverty out front," shelter employee Troy Harris told the *Journal-Constitution*. "If

the city was doing what it says it is doing in placing people in housing, we wouldn't have 700 people a night in here. We are the visible truth of Atlanta.”

Atlanta's political establishment has taken several measures over the past decade to push out the poorest layers of the population and gentrify the downtown area. In the mid-1990s, in preparation for hosting the Olympics, the city initiated a systematic destruction of public housing.

The first city to open public housing units to the poor in the 1930s, Atlanta now bears the distinction of being the first city to have all of them closed down. In the past 15 years, the city has torn down some 15,000 units in 32 housing projects. According to a 2007 study by the Georgia Institute of Technology, as the number of units was halved and replaced by mixed-income communities, only one third of displaced residents were able to resettle.

As part of the same broad strategy of gentrification, beginning in 2003 Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin issued a series of orders banning such acts as donating food to the homeless on downtown streets, soliciting donations and sleeping in public areas. Atlanta police, posing as tourists, have staged a series of undercover street sweeps, arresting dozens of homeless people for asking for money.

The policies in Atlanta are not unique. Virtually all major cities in the US have put in place measures to criminalize homelessness and push shelters, clinics and other services outside of the downtown areas. As the economic crisis deepens, those pushed out of their jobs and homes will come under increasing attack, as the ruling establishment seeks to obscure the social realities.

In July, the National Coalition for the Homeless issued a report on this trend throughout the country. A survey of 235 cities found that one-third have ordinances in place banning “camping” in public areas, and 30 percent banned “sitting/lying” in public areas. Nearly half of all cities surveyed had bans on “loitering” and begging.



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