

Southern California homeless shelters struggle to cope with economic crisis

Our correspondents
27 January 2010

Many non-profit groups in California that help homeless youth and single mothers suffering from domestic abuse are struggling to cope with the fact that their funding has declined even as an increasing number of families and individuals are seeking their help.

For example, according to a study released on January 20 by the University of San Diego, a private Catholic university in southern California, 31 percent of San Diego's non-profit and philanthropic sector reported "very negative" effects from the economic recession in 2009, while a further 58 percent reported "somewhat negative" effects.

The study detailed the specific areas where the non-profits have seen their funding decline: 72 percent reported a fall-off in investments or endowments, 65 percent saw a drop in corporate or individual donations, 54 percent reported a decrease in contributions from local government sources, 50 percent reported a decline in state funding, and 32 percent saw a decrease in revenue generated from increased fees or services.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Dennis Clarke, director of Micah's Way, an all-volunteer non-profit that provides emergency services to the poor in Orange County, which is situated just north of San Diego and is known as being one of the wealthiest areas in California. In 2005—that is, before the onset of the current economic crisis—the county was home to 35,000 homeless people.

According to Dennis, Santa Ana, where Micah's Way is located, "has the highest density of homeless in the United States.

"Our main job," he explained, "is not to alleviate the problems of homelessness *per se*, but to alleviate the problems of poverty."

Dominick Corradino, a board member and food coordinator, noted the difficulties that Micah's Way confronts. "At this level," he said, "we're simply just

feeding families and taking care of them and not bringing them up from poverty, because we're not equipped with enough space."

In regards to the type of people that they are helping, Dennis explained they have "always dealt with the very poor—those who have to decide between food and shoes, or food and gas, in a very wealthy part of the world." He added, "We are beginning to see more people who have hit the streets as a result of the economic conditions. Mostly, it's the same people, the dispossessed, poor people, people with a lack of education, people who have succumbed to drugs and alcohol, people with mental disorders, and so on."

Dominick also said that they have noticed more families sliding into poverty after losing their jobs. "Today, there was a family that volunteers took us out to. They were living in their van. They lost their house, they lost their job, and they lost everything they had."

He also talked about the dire situation facing the elderly in a trailer park near Santa Ana. "My mother's rent is going up, but her income is stationary. There are people in her mobile unit who can barely make rent, so they sell part of their medication to get food money. There are a number of organizations that bring food on a regular basis and it all disappears. I bring a loaf of bread down and it'll be gone by the end of the day," he said.

Dominick described the general poverty afflicting the area. "This morning when we were delivering Christmas packages, there were three or four families living in a three-room apartment and sharing the rent. That never gets seen. I remember seeing tenements in New York City when I was younger, with the clotheslines and everything," he recalled. "But you don't see tenements *per se* in Santa Ana. It's all covered well."

As Dennis explained, the immigrant population is especially vulnerable to economic and social hardships. "The big problem is establishing trust with people who

are undocumented here. Most people won't even go to a church for help; they fear they are going to be turned into the ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement]. Micah's Way keeps its files in such a manner that if a cop does come looking for someone, we have absolute deniability because we do not keep such information on a computer."

Micah's Way is experiencing difficulties maintaining its operations, hanging by a thread financially. According to Dominick, donations have fallen significantly. "We now measure our existence in terms of how long we can go without another donation—how long can we stay in business? I think we're out to 5 months without another donation. That's the reality we live with."

The WSWs also spoke with the director of St. Clare's Home—a shelter for homeless and battered women and children in San Diego since 1983—and two women who came to the shelter seeking help.

Ronnie Root, a case manager at St. Clare's Home, told the WSWs, "We have four staff. We used to have four to five counselors, and a Drug and Alcohol Abuse Director—a total of 20 people. We downsized tremendously. The problem with volunteers is that they're not consistent." At the same time, she noted, "Our phone calls have been doubled."

Ronnie explained that the shelter offers five-bedroom houses, with 5 women and sometimes up to 13 children in a house. However, because of the staff reduction they no longer offer drug abuse or domestic abuse programs. These programs are vital, Ronnie insisted, because they help women overcome some of "the underlying reasons for why [they] are homeless."

She explained the relationship between the plight that these women face and cuts in social services at the state level. "There is a domino effect. They just cut \$19 million from domestic abuse [services] and are shutting down daycare [centers]. Women are eating well because of food stamps but are still getting kicked out of where they live. You have a three-month time period before the sheriffs come [to enforce] an eviction. They're forcing [people] onto the street."

The welfare situation is also dire for these women. Ronnie explained, "Now that CalWorks [the state welfare-to-work program] is cut, there are no more workers at the welfare office, only student volunteers, which means now you have to wait longer to get benefits. I blame the government for not giving us what we need. We went from having 35 women to 16 women, maximum."

Angelique, a young mother of two, told the WSWs her story of how she came into contact with the shelter. In 2007, while trying to get a credit card advance at a bank, she left her eighteen-month-old son in the car for several minutes with the windows rolled down. When she came back to the car, she was arrested for "child endangerment" and her son was placed into foster care. Although she lived in Georgia at the time, she had to keep flying back and forth to California, where she had been arrested, to appear in court.

Efforts to live with family in Los Angeles did not work. Before she came to the shelter, the owner of the condo where she lived changed the locks and she found herself homeless. By this point, she also had another child. "We slept in my car," she explained. "Then they cut my welfare from \$533 to \$328. I was calling 25 places a day. All the shelters said the same, 'We're full.'" At this point Angelique thought the only place left to stay with her child was either the parking lot of Target or the airport.

The search for jobs is very difficult. "You're in line for the same jobs as everyone else. I've been looking for three months," she said. Angelique is currently taking online classes with the University of Phoenix and wants to be a family attorney.

Thembi, a mother who had been fighting a drug abuse problem for 10 years but has since overcome her addiction, was also at St. Clare's and spoke with the WSWs. Fleeing a relationship scarred by physical abuse, she eventually went into a mental health facility because of severe emotional distress. After being turned away from other shelters that only had space available for Hurricane Katrina victims, Thembi found herself at St. Clare's. Describing her efforts to find a shelter she remarked, "It feels like you're never in control."

Thembi wants to be an Alcohol and Drug counselor and is going to school, but "the classes are really expensive, about \$13,000 a year," she explained. "When you're on welfare you can qualify for grants, but it's hard for me to go to a campus while my son's in daycare."



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