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Nonprofits struggle

Increase in people needing assistance met by decrease in donations for area agencies

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By 11:30 Tuesday morning, a long line of people waiting for a free hot lunch had formed at Loveland's Community Kitchen.

Each face in the crowd was different: middle-aged men with beards, senior-aged women with wrinkles and glasses, teenagers with baseball caps and a shy 4- or 5-year-old boy.

As the line moved through the dining room at First Presbyterian Church, volunteers handed each person a plate of vegetable beef stew, bread and peaches, provided through community donations and grants.

Graciously accepting the meal, the clients one by one sat down at round tables to eat. Soon, the room began looking more like a busy restaurant than the basement of a church, with the diners representing a variety of segments of the community.

Recently, the Community Kitchen — a nonprofit that serves free meals to anyone who shows up — has seen a dramatic increase in the number of people coming in each day. While it used to serve an average of 30 or 40, it's now hitting upwards of 100 people a day.

"A lot of them are not homeless," said board member Doreen MacDonald.

"Most are just people who need a meal — families and seniors who can't make ends meet." The Community Kitchen is not the only local nonprofit seeing this trend.

Many Loveland agencies are feeling the pinch in these hard economic times, just like the people they serve — because not only is the number of clients seeking help at the agencies increasing, but the amount of money that community members are able to donate to them is declining.

"It is a real concern that we will not be able to provide services for people who really need it," said AnnMarie Arbo, executive director of Angel House.

The Clients

Angel House, which works in conjunction with the Interfaith Hospitality Network, provides homeless families transitional housing and counseling to help them get back on their feet.

In the past year, the nonprofit has been constantly full, with a waiting list of families trying to get the housing and help they need, Arbo said.

“We’re getting more and more calls from people that just don’t know what to do,” she said.

With the housing crisis and general economic crunch, more families are losing their homes, only to find that all the affordable rentals already are taken.

Angel House has homes for only a few families and sometimes has to turn families away. “I’m not sure where people are going,” Arbo said.

The House of Neighborly Service, which provides emergency services such as food and utility payment assistance, also has seen an increase in the number of people looking for help.

The agency is serving 39 percent more people than it did last year — with a 26 percent increase in new clients.

“People in higher income brackets are really starting to feel the impact of the economy,” said Glorie Magrum, executive director. Many of these community members come in seeking utility assistance, she said, then move on to use other services the agency offers, such as food baskets. “The clientele has been hit hard,” she said.

Another agency seeing the impact of the poor economy is the United Way of Larimer County. Its information and referral service, 211, has received nearly twice as many calls each month — jumping from an average 2,500 calls to 4,500.

And the nature of the calls has changed, too.

“We’re getting more crisis calls, meaning folks are being foreclosed on, need mortgage assistance, shelter and emergency housing,” said Tracy Hays, director of 211.

“We’re seeing a great need right now. We’re in a desperate situation.”

The Donors

The sluggish economy is not only stretching nonprofits’ resources by increasing their clients — it’s also cutting down on the number of donations they’re receiving because donors are tightening their own budgets.

“We’ve had some lessening in funding,” said Angel House’s Arbo, who said she has received letters of apology from previous donors who simply can’t afford to give anymore.

“(Donors) are still giving something, but definitely giving less than before,” she said. “But thank goodness they’re still giving something.”

Media attention and fundraisers have helped raise awareness and money for some of these nonprofits — but each spike in funding soon trickles away, said Sally Wabeke of the Community Kitchen.

Unlike some nonprofits, the House of Neighborly Service still has been raising a steady amount of cash donations this year, Magrum said; however, the agency has seen a decline in the number of food donations — which is also a vital part of its program.

“More people are aware of how much we can stretch (cash donations),” said Erin Becerra, the nonprofit’s food manager. “But without food as well, it doesn’t go as far.”

While the agency can buy food at a low cost from the Food Bank for Larimer County, it’s only meant to use cash to supplement what was not donated. The food bank doesn’t always have every food item the nonprofit needs, and staffers instead have to buy these products at a higher price.

“Now we’re having to buy everything,” Magrum said.

The Future

Faced with more clients and fewer donations, many local nonprofits are cutting back where they can without limiting their services.

The Community Kitchen is using less meat in each dish, and Angel House asks its clients to take shorter showers.

“We’re being more cautious with expenses,” Arbo said.

Yet none of the nonprofits has had to eliminate services — and they don’t plan to.

“The community has always been supportive,” House of Neighborly Service’s Becerra said. “We may have to make changes, but we’re always going to be here to help people.”

However, it’s up to the community to help the nonprofits help others.

“We need donations more than ever,” said United Way of Larimer County’s Pam Davis. “These are times when you really see it making a difference.”