

Donations for Basic Necessities -- Food, Shelter, Giving Blood -- Way Down in Summer

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While people are anticipating upcoming family vacations, relishing other summer pastimes, and enjoying myriad water activities, area nonprofits are feeling the pinch, as their funding streams are drying up.

"Donations have slowed to a trickle," says Sandra Scherer, executive director of the Monument Crisis Center. "Things always dip in the summertime ... people are on vacation. Thoughts about hungry kids are just not there. It's always a struggle."

The center has offered sustenance and support to 10,500 families since opening its doors nine years ago. According to Scherer, an estimated 40 percent of its clients are single moms, and recent trends include a sizable increase in the number of seniors and adults with disabilities, with new clients coming to the center daily.

"With all the cuts, people are caught between a rock and a hard place," she adds.

Such cuts will have a potentially grave impact when it comes to housing the homeless and preventing low-income families from losing their homes, notes Tim O'Keefe, executive director of Shelter, Inc.

O'Keefe describes the dwindling in donations in 2012 as a "head scratcher." The climate in recent prior years saw people giving generously in the midst of the recession. But with the increasing need and lower donations, it creates "the perfect storm."

The nonprofit provided housing relief services to 3,000 families in 2006 and the figured had doubled by 2011, he says.

This August sees the sunset of a three-year federal grant -- the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act -- which provided a total of \$3.3 million in funds for Shelter, Inc and six partner agencies in Contra Costa County.

Those funds prevented roughly 6,000 people, half of whom are children, from becoming homeless, O'Keefe says.

Reflective of diminishing aid from the federal and state governments, area nonprofits have had to absorb more responsibility in providing essential services, notes Jo Loss, the new executive director of the Volunteer Center of the East Bay.

"The economy is putting more pressure on nonprofits than ever before and the pool of people needing these services is bigger than ever before," says Loss. "Our capacity is being stretched in all areas and it's the children and the elderly that are getting the most pressure."

Consistent with other local nonprofits, the Concord chapter of The Salvation Army is seeking more donations as it struggles to provide food "for the needy and the destitute" from its local pantry, Maj. Clay Gardner pleaded in a recent release.

The pantry on Clayton Road provides food for 500 families each month.

The amount of money raised from their signature red kettles clanging in front of stores during the holidays was not as successful as in previous years, notes business administrator Susan Pierce -- and those funds are vanishing.

Pierce also noted that they have not been able to offer as much in utilities assistance through a grant from PG&E that relies on private contributions.

"It's a whole combination. It's seasonal. It's the time of year when our financial resources are the most lean," says Pierce.

The need can be more apparent in summer when children who are fed with the free or reduced lunch program during the school year are needing breakfast, and that midday meal, cites Lisa Sherrill, community relations manager for the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano.

She notes the dearth in donated food during the summer that is consistent with hunger relief across the nation, contrasting it to the robust number of food drives during the holidays.

Food drive coordinator Joan Tomasini states that last summer yielded 82,000 pounds of food from such efforts, as opposed to the 600,000 pounds of food it generated during October through December 2011.

The Food Bank does benefit, she says, from its participation in national campaigns, such as Feeding America, and the ensuing awareness of the plight keeps the need to contribute more in the forefront.

Locally, the Food Bank is getting ready to launch a program to increase the amount of produce that's available for the disadvantaged, and has a neighborhood-based approach under way where volunteer coordinators pick up donated bags from their neighbors twice a month and deliver it to the Concord-based facility.

Meanwhile, the local office of the American Red Cross has pulled out the stops, for the second time calling upon faith communities who have agreed to host 80 drives this month to address a dire depletion in inventories of blood supply, especially types O positive, O negative, B negative and A negative.

And, administrators of these area nonprofits remain optimistic that Contra Costa County residents will heed their rallying cry.

"(Historically), people really respond in a very heartwarming, generous, caring way," says Scherer.