

# The worst of times?

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By Karen Lee Ziner Journal Staff Writer

In September, well before the holiday season got under way, a new statewide “211” phone referral line for social services logged 9,300 calls that overwhelmingly reflected desperation. Families stranded on the streets. Tenants evicted by foreclosures. People forced to choose between medication and food, or food and fuel.

On Thursday, “someone called to say they had a week-old infant and a 15-month-old child, and nowhere to go,” said Courtney Smith, one of a dozen information specialists who handle calls on the 211 line operated out of Crossroads Rhode Island and paid for by the United Way of Rhode Island. “They were homeless.”

Several days prior, “we collectively received calls from people who shared one apartment house. All had paid their rent, and it turned out their landlord had picked up and left. They had no utilities, no water and nowhere to go. The house had been foreclosed upon.”

Social-service advocates predict that a potentially disastrous confluence of events is going to make things worse, from record heating-oil costs and record foreclosures to spikes in gas prices, diminished childcare availability, lack of affordable housing, slashed state spending, a soaring state budget deficit and a squeeze on philanthropic giving.

Add to that a soon-to-be released study by the Poverty Institute of Rhode Island at Rhode Island College that cites a slight decline in the state’s median wage, says Kate Brewster, the agency’s executive director.

“I can’t even begin to tell you how depressing it is right now,” said Anne M. Nolan, president of Crossroads in Providence, a nonprofit agency whose many services include crisis intervention, housing, health care and vocational training.

Since January, Nolan said, “we’ve seen a 21-percent increase in the number of homeless adults” from last year. Owing to budget cuts and demand pressures, Crossroads is heading into its 2008 budget “with the worst deficit we’ve ever had.”

Nolan also said the agency is beginning to feel the impact of record foreclosures in Rhode Island. During the second quarter of this year, 8 out of every 1,000 mortgages fell into foreclosure, according to the Mortgage Bankers Association.

“We are seeing people who are renting in properties that are being foreclosed upon. When they rent it’s very different. A landlord will say, ‘I’m being ’ When they leave, “we see the foreclosed on — you’ve got to get out.’ trickle-down effect,” Nolan said.

A CASE IN POINT is that of Ameena Gatlin, who was evicted last month from a Central Falls apartment after the city condemned it. Foreclosure proceedings may have figured into the equation.

Gatlin, 26, said she and a friend shared the \$600-a-month apartment until things went awry in October and they began receiving notices of a water shutoff.

According to Gatlin, when the landlord — Peter Kaczmarzyk of Warwick — came to collect October rent, he said he was unaware of a pending water shutoff. Subsequently, Gatlin said, “he came and said he spoke to the water company and that ‘everything’s OK.’ We were all under the impression it was not going to be shut off. We all paid him rent.”

Then the water was shut off and tenants were without it for a week until the Fire Department brought some, she said.

City officials confirmed last week that they condemned and boarded the building in question — 144 Central St. — after police investigated a complaint about a chained animal, and found animal and human feces scattered through the house, as well as roaches.

Gatlin said the police came on Oct. 20, “and told us the whole house is uninhabitable, and we had two hours to get out. We all had pets. We took what we could carry, and then we left.” When she and her roommate went to City Hall after their eviction, “we found out the bank had foreclosed on the house.”

Gatlin also said that only one of about nine tenants got rent back from the landlord. Others were unable to reach him: a police report cites the same difficulty.

The city assessor’s office could not confirm that the building was actually in foreclosure when it was condemned, but the Pawtucket Times on Friday ran a legal notice of foreclosure: the property is up for auction on Dec. 7.

Reached by phone on Thursday, Kaczmarzyk called the situation “a private matter.”

He said it was “not the case” that tenants were not repaid their rent. “Everything was pretty much squared away. Everything. I got hold of everybody. Everyone is informed,” he said.

For Gatlin, things got worse. When she called her boss to say she was homeless, “they told me they were not putting me back on the schedule,” she said. She and her friend lived at Amos House shelter for weeks before the Blackstone Valley Community Action Program helped them get another apartment. She is still without a job.

Cases like Gatlin's appear to be the early squalls in a chilling forecast issued by many social-service advocates. They report increased requests for help with food and fuel oil, increased homelessness, shelter space at capacity and donations in decline.

"It's going to be a disastrous winter," says Henry Shelton, coordinator of the George Wiley Center, an antipoverty agency.

Shelton, a fixture in the fight against utility shutoffs, said he learned last week "that National Grid broke an all-time record for shutoffs [with] almost 30,000." (See related story). He said he takes particular exception since the governor and legislators stripped \$15 million from a new fuel-assistance program this year and put the program on hold for at least 18 months.

He intends to raise these issues when he visits Governor Carcieri's office tomorrow to deliver signed "letters of conscience" from religious leaders urging the state to restore utility service to all residents who have lost heat or electricity due to nonpayment.

Brewster, of the Poverty Institute, said her agency is set to release a study of the state of working Rhode Island that shows a slight decline in the median wage. Rhode Island "is the only state in New England to experience an actual decline in our median wage since 2000," she said.

Eileen Hayes, executive director of Amos House in Providence, said "it's already been a bad fall for Amos House" and predicts that the winter will be equally bad..

"The nonprofits are left trying to be the safety net for all the people trying to come to us, because the system is not working. It's no different than it always has been," she said.

Hayes said the new 211 clearinghouse number — similar to the 911 emergency line and accessible from any phone — has brought "a bombardment" of calls that Amos House cannot keep up with because it, too, lacks money. The nonprofit agency's many services include shelter, a soup kitchen, job training and referrals.

Tony Maione, president of the United Way of Rhode Island, joined the chorus of gloomy predictions.

"Think about it; it's more expensive to keep your household going; it's more expensive to go to work," said Maione. "You may have lost some daycare support from last year, which was provided to help people go to work. You're paying \$2.89 [a gallon] for fuel oil at home, and \$3.15 at the pump.

"So all of this kind of comes together and puts tremendous stress on families and households. If you're on the edge to start with, you could be really in trouble."

Andrew Schiff, executive director of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank, said he believes that the demand for emergency food, particularly at food pantries and soup kitchens, is going to rise.

(Food Bank spokesman Michael Cerio estimates that the agency's average distribution of 700,000 to 720,000 pounds of food per month will grow by 10 percent or more as the holidays, and winter, begin.

Said Schiff, "I think that the increase in costs of heating oil, which has doubled since 2002," will mean that people "are literally deciding between paying the heating-oil bill or having enough money to buy groceries. It's going to drive more people to emergency food programs."

Jamie Cassidy, state social worker director for the Salvation Army, said fuel-oil requests are up significantly, and "we've also seen an extreme need in food assistance."

Cassidy also reported that the level of donations for Thanksgiving baskets "has not even been close to what it was last year at this time" in the collection bins at Shaw's supermarkets.

Lorraine Burns, who has operated a food pantry at St. Teresa's Church in the Olneyville section of Providence for 12 years, said she is now seeing "about 600 people a month, and it's going up."

"They're concerned about heating, or eating," said Burns. "And for the elderly, it's not only 'heat or eat,' it's medication. They're taking their medication every three days, instead of daily. It's a horror show."

Burns said she is joining Henry Shelton of the George Wiley Center in the quest to get people's utilities restored by Thanksgiving.

"If you don't look into that person's eyes, and see that person's hungriness and homelessness, then you don't see it," said Burns. And of those people who turn away, she added, "If they don't see it, they don't care about it. It's not affecting them."