

No Economic Recovery in Sight for Those at the Bottom

By Amaris Elliott-Engel

STAMFORD -- While the American economy has been officially out of recession for four years, local social service providers say the need for assistance for the least well-off in Fairfield County has not slackened.

Jason Shaplen, chief executive officer of Inspirica Inc., one of the largest providers of services to the homeless in Connecticut, said the demand for his organization's services is at a record level. The number of people living on the street in Connecticut has increased 82 percent in the past three years, and the number of homeless people in Stamford and Greenwich increased 45 percent in the past year, according to Shaplen.



Nationally, 100 million Americans live in poverty or live within 50 percent of the poverty line, Shaplen added.

Historically, homelessness was connected to people having mental health problems, substance addictions or lack of education, Shaplen said. While all those things still cause people to become homeless, the new driver for homelessness are people who are unable to find work or make enough money from their work to meet all of their needs, especially in a housing market as expensive as Stamford's, Shaplen said. There are even working homeless, he said.

Robert Arnold, president and CEO of Family Centers Inc., which provides education, health and human services to children, adults and families in Fairfield County, said the economic recovery has been uneven, and people at the lowest rung of the economic ladder have had the lowest level of recovery.

"Things have to get really better up in the middle and the top to lift up the bottom level," Arnold said. "Things haven't gotten that good in the middle and the top to really lift up the bottom level." Many people are working jobs on which they can barely subsist, Arnold said.

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The winter also is a harder time for people in poverty in Fairfield County because they have the additional seasonal expenses of heating, buying winter clothing and maintaining vehicles that are not in great shape to survive winter weather, Arnold said.

Juanita Ball, director of the energy services department at anti-poverty agency Norwalk Economic Opportunity Now, said that in the 33 years she has worked with the department that the need for heating assistance has always been increasing. "The needs now are worse than they have been," Ball said.

There are almost 2,000 clients certified for assistance this winter, Ball said, in the eight towns Norwalk Economic Opportunity Now serves: Stamford, Darien, Greenwich, Norwalk, Wilton, Weston, Westport and New Canaan.

In the past, the agency had money from donations to assist people who were making too much to receive heating allotments, Ball said, but this year that is not possible.

When clients come in for heating assistance, they often need assistance with secondary issues like other power sources such as their electric, rent or food, Ball said.

The continued and increasing need for social services in Fairfield County is occurring at the same time as many agencies are facing decreases in funding.

Inspirica estimates that it is going to have a \$215,000 increase in expenses due to three causes: covering the 2 percent increase in the payroll tax, increases in health care costs due to the Affordable Care Act and the general increase in health care costs. Inspirica also is projecting a \$200,000 cut due to the federal sequestration and a shortfall in the Connecticut state budget.

"What you have is an extremely volatile situation with much greater demand and much fewer resources," Shaplen said.

Inspirica hopes that private-sector donors will step into the gap. Not only does helping people who are homeless play to "our better angels," Shaplen said, but it is in the interest of Stamford to avoid rampant homelessness in order to attract businesses to invest in the city, to attract families to live in the city and to have stores and restaurants desirous of locating in downtown.

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Arnold said that the Stamford Head Start program, dollars that go to HIV/AIDS services and Federal Emergency Management Agency money for emergency food and housing assistance all were hit by government cuts due to the sequestration or other reasons.

The cuts have affected services areas where the services could have been increased, not decreased, Arnold said. For example, the need for the emergency food and housing assistance has been three or four times more than the funding stream could pay for, he said.

"We have not really felt the kind of recovery that we need to lift up the people who are struggling on the low end," Arnold said. "As long as that's the case, sequestration adds more pain. We've been able to keep the children in the Head Start program but that can't last forever."

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