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Hard times hitting home

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Local charities and assistance agencies say they are feeling a financial pinch as the nation's jobless rate climbs to nearly 10 percent and the poverty rate is at an 11-year high, according to statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau.

The Rev. Katrina Deason, who heads up the Manna House food pantry and soup kitchen in Hinesville, said the current economic crunch has everyone in a tight spot.

"Are we feeling the pressure of this economic situation?" she asks. "Absolutely. Most people working today are only a paycheck away from an empty refrigerator."

At this time last year, Deason said most of her organization's clients were low-income seniors and people with disabilities, but as the country's unemployment rate has risen, she's seen people from all walks of life visit the food pantry.

"Now I am seeing more and more professional people, people with degrees and people who want to work, but can't find jobs," she said.

Leah Poole oversees the United Way of Liberty County. Her organization is responsible for raising funds to assist more than 30 agencies like Deason's.

Poole said although the United Way doesn't usually offer direct services, she has seen some evidence that more people are in need of assistance today.

"I would say that our call volume, both here at the office on MLK and through 211 [the United Way assistance hotline that is tracked by zip code], has increased by at least one-third," she said.

Poole also said the funds her agency received earlier this year from the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act to assist Liberty residents with rent, mortgage and utilities have been depleted — another sign of the current economic climate.

"That money was used to help over 60 people stay in their homes with power," she said.

According to Census Bureau data released Tuesday by the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, the number of individuals living in poverty in 2008 grew by 57,014, bringing the state's poverty level to 14.7 percent in 2008.

While requested Liberty County poverty statistics were not available by press time, Clare Richie, senior policy analyst for GBPI, an independent, nonpartisan think tank, blamed budget cuts and lack of social legislation for the poverty increase.

"More and more, Georgia families are struggling to make ends meet, yet our state's policymakers continue to cut critical services like health care and education, and to divert Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funds from struggling families to fill state budget gaps," she said.

Deason agreed with Richie.

"We just increased our emergency issuance of a five-day supply of food from one month to three months because it is taking a lot longer for people to get food stamps," she said. "There's a back-up in the whole system," Deason said. "If things don't turn around, we're just going to see a greater increase in services."

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