

## Charities That Serve Homeless People Seek Long-Term Change

By Brennen Jensen

**M**ARIN COUNTY, CALIF., just north of San Francisco, is among the most affluent areas in the nation. But even there, the protracted recession and foreclosure crisis present a pernicious problem: low-income families and individuals who lose a job and then find they are losing the roof over their head as well.

Shelters in the county that can house entire families now have three-month waiting lists, and requests for aid at a charity-run homeless "help desk" have risen 35 percent since the start of the recession.

Marin joins counties and cities across the country where more and more people lack shelter, not because of mental illness or substance abuse—the traditional causes of homelessness—but simply because they have run out of money. In Boston, for example, the number of homeless families rose 22 percent last year.

"It's gotten so bad and people are so desperate some cities don't know where to put these people," says Michael Stoops, director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, an advocacy group in Washington.

But change could soon be on the way, as federal aid from the new economic-stimulus law is scheduled to be delivered to homelessness organizations this summer. Congress provided \$1.5-billion, as much as the federal government usually spends in a single year on homelessness.

Charity leaders say they hope that with so much money available, they can finally make strides toward long-term changes in how they provide shelter to the needy. Their goal is to move toward a system that provides cash assistance to people at risk of losing their housing because they are behind on their rent or utility bills.

For those who still lose their homes, such cash assistance can help them quickly pay for a new place to live—what homelessness groups call "rapid rehousing." The idea is to keep people out of shelters or, barring that, to greatly reduce the length of stay in such facilities.

The stimulus fund represents a "once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform homeless assistance to be more effective and efficient," declares the National Alliance to End Homelessness, in Washington, on its Web site.

### A 'Safety-Net Center'

The federal stimulus money, which is to be spent over three years, will go primarily to state and local governments. It can be used to provide emergency assistance with rent, utility bills, security deposits, moving costs, and other expenses people incur as they seek housing. Nonprofit



BOB KIDA JR., FOR THE CHRONICLE

**Joel John Roberts, of PATH Partners, seeks stimulus funds so his group can focus on homelessness prevention: "It's cheaper and better to help a family pay their rent for a couple of months than it is for them to end up on the streets."**

groups are poised to play a sizable role in ultimately delivering the homelessness services financed by the federal stimulus law. Charities have until September 30 to make agreements with local government officials to obtain some of the stimulus funds.

Joel John Roberts, president of PATH Partners, a Los Angeles group that provides social services to the homeless, says PATH will apply for a portion of the more than \$30-million the Los Angeles area is expected to receive this summer.

Meanwhile, he has already adjusted some of his programs, converting part of a "homeless services mall," where more than a dozen social-service organizations dispense information to the homeless, into a "safety-net center," where people at risk of homelessness can connect with sources of legal and financial help to stay housed.

"If the \$1.5-billion was simply to fund existing shelters and transitional housing, it would be a waste of money," Mr. Roberts says. "But this can go toward helping agencies transform into helping people before they end up on the streets. It's cheaper and better to help a family pay their rent for a couple of months than it is for them to end up on the streets and then have to get them back into an apartment."

He says homelessness groups needed the prod from the federal government to rethink their operations.

"A lot of homelessness agencies were started in the 1980s and are still using that same 1980s service model," Mr. Roberts says. "Agencies need to change now or they will go out of business."

Nan Roman, president of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, says that many organizations have long wanted to move toward preventing homelessness, but haven't been able to do so while maintaining their shelters.

"It's like they couldn't change the tire while the car was running," she says. "What this fund does is offer them the opportunity to set up a front-end system that is really focused on finding people who are going to become homeless and rehousing those that are."

### Resource Library

While some charities have long focused on preventing homelessness and already use the other approaches encouraged by the stimulus law, others have yet to try them.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness used a \$25,000 grant from the Melville Charitable Trust, in Boston, to create an online library of resources for organizations that plan to get money from the stimulus law. It includes profiles of successful programs around the country that seek to prevent homelessness, as well as job descriptions of potential new staff members the money could pay

for, such as a "housing resource coordinator" to identify low-cost housing opportunities and develop relationships with landlords who would rent space as part of a homelessness-prevention effort.

### Emergency Hotline

Among the efforts commonly promoted by homelessness experts as a model: the Columbus Shelter Board, in Ohio, a nonprofit umbrella group that coordinates the city's homelessness efforts. The linchpin of its efforts is a 24-hour emergency phone line, run by the YWCA Family Center, where families who may soon become homeless, or already are, can speak with counselors who can connect them with sources of financial assistance.

"This single-point-of-contact system, in the first seven years that we operated it, reduced family homelessness by about 40 percent," says Barbara Poppe, the group's executive director.

Columbus is scheduled to receive \$2.6-million from the new stimulus fund, and Ms. Poppe hopes to use a portion of the money to expand the phone system to aid single adults, instead of just families.

Leah Camhi, president of the Front Door Collaborative, a nonprofit group in Boston that coordinates the city's homelessness-prevention programs, says the approach the stimulus money pays for "is not rocket science."

"It is obviously so much more cost-effective if we can keep people in their housing," Ms. Camhi says. She says her group spends on average \$1,700 to help someone who is struggling to stay in their home, compared with the \$10,000 or more per person it can cost to assist someone who has had to move into a shelter.

A challenge now, she says, is to find those families who need short-term help to avoid bigger problems later. Her group is working with the Greater Boston Interfaith Alliance, which represents 500 religious groups, many of which operate food pantries.

"One of the first areas where families run into trouble is food," Ms. Camhi says. "When people first go to food pantries or get food stamps, we want to hit them with other resources."

Chicago spends about \$5-million to curb homelessness, most of it from the Emergency Fund, the charity that coordinates the city's emergency-assistance programs.

With calls to a citywide homeless hotline up 60 percent since the start of the recession, the more than \$35-million the city is expected to receive in stimulus money is sorely needed, says Nonie Brennan, president of the Emergency Fund.

She notes, however, that as much as a third of the fund's money for programs to prevent homelessness has traditionally come from philanthropic sources. Charities, she says, will still

need to raise private money for homelessness prevention and rapid rehousing programs because such money usually comes with fewer restrictions than government aid does.

Stimulus money, for instance, cannot be used to help needy people pay for transportation, or to acquire household furnishings.

"If you are going to move a family out of a shelter into housing, most likely that family is not going to have beds or a kitchen table," Ms. Brennan says. "If you can combine public funds with what you can raise privately, you can make sure that the family is going to have what they need to be able to function in the home."

Charities now waiting to receive stimulus money are mind-

"A lot of homelessness agencies were started in the 1980s and are still using that same 1980s service model."

ful that this is a one-time infusion designed, with the other stimulus dollars, to help the nation achieve economic recovery.

"There is some concern about sustainability," says Ms. Roman, of the National Alliance to End Homelessness. "The hope is if you can do more prevention, your needs for shelter would start to go down and then you could start to reinvest some of that money into prevention."

Some of the money in the stimulus bill can be put toward measuring results and evaluating whether homelessness-prevention programs are working—studies that advocates say are critical to keeping the nation's focus on prevention.

"At the end of the day the Obama administration is going to ask what happened to the \$1.5-billion," says Mary Cunningham, a senior researcher at the Urban Institute, a Washington think tank. "If communities can show that they prevented homelessness for a large group of single adults and families and also rapidly rehoused a large group, then I think there will be more attention and funding for this form of intervention in the future."

Ms. Camhi, of the Front Door Collaborative, is more blunt: "We're getting this huge cash infusion," she says, "And I kind of feel this is our one chance to get it right."