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Family homelessness on rise

By Bill Silverfarb Daily Journal staff

A report to Congress released last week indicates the number of homeless families in the country increased for the second straight year despite overall figures being down.

Locally, the Shelter Network has seen calls for help increase from about 100 a week two years ago to 1,700 in the last few weeks, said the nonprofit agency's Director of Development Chris Canter.

Shelter Network provides emergency and transitional housing for homeless people and gets 60 percent of its support from government sources.

The 2009 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress is a yearly study by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development designed to measure the scope of homelessness across the country.

HUD's latest report finds that 643,000 people were homeless on a given night in 2009 while roughly 1.56 million people spent at least one night in a shelter in 2009.

Long-term or chronic homelessness, however, has continued a pattern of decline since 2006, according to the report.

"In 2009, nearly 62,000 more family members were in emergency shelter or transitional housing at some point during the year than had been in 2007. Considered as households rather than as separate people, the growth in sheltered family homelessness over the three years was almost 40,000 families, representing a 30 percent increase," according to the report.

The Shelter Network's six facilities in San Mateo County are all filled up now and 30 families are currently on a waiting list, Canter said.

Shelter Network is also hearing from concerned people who are on the edge of being homeless, those families in which one of the parents may have recently lost their job and are struggling to pay rent or are forced to live with other family.

Calls are also coming in from families who paid their rent but whose landlords failed to pay the mortgage, Canter said.

Shelter Network has received federal stimulus money for homeless prevention to help families stay in their homes and gives out hotel vouchers in emergencies.

Transitional housing is available for some families up to six months.

"It is taking people longer to find jobs," Canter said. "All our sites are full. We are trying to get people in and out as quickly as possible to open up more beds."

The agency served 1,800 children last month and is on pace to surpass that number this year, he said.

Shelter Network's annual budget is about \$8 million but has seen a decline in donations and foundation support. While contributions from the federal government is level, giving at the county and city level is down by about 10 percent, he said.

"The wild card is the state. We are expecting about \$400,000 from the state. If we don't get the funding it will be a huge blow to us," Canter said.

Up to 90 percent of those who seek shelter with the agency are back to self-sufficiency in three months," Canter said.

"Our objective is to address the problem in a cost-effective manner, rather than open up more shelters," he said.

There were 2,064 homeless people in San Mateo County in 2007. The county will conduct another homeless count in 2011.

"As a nation, we appear to be doing a better job sheltering those who might otherwise be living on our streets but clearly homelessness is impacting a greater share of families with children," HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan said last week after the report was released. "As patterns of homelessness change, we must use the latest data to tailor our response. The Obama administration is committed to ending homelessness in all its forms."

A recent study found a nearly five-fold increase in the rate of housing overcrowding, suggesting that many families are doubling up in response to the economic downturn, according to the report. If some of these family support networks already are struggling to make ends meet, some of the doubled-up families may find their way into the homeless residential service system during 2010.