

Dozens more Indy families homeless

6/18/2009

Indianapolis Star, Robert King

Homelessness came to Larry Spivey and his family suddenly.

In May, IUPUI laid him off from his job as a campus cook. His wife, Tonya, became seriously ill with heart problems, draining their savings. And in a short time, Spivey, a father of two who had never been homeless, couldn't make his rent.

That story -- a lost job and serious illness -- is a classic formula for homelessness for families. And, as new numbers released Wednesday show, the homeless population in Indianapolis is increasingly taking on a different look: intact families hitting the streets together.

Timothy Joyce of the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention said this recession has been nastier for families than most. In the past, people living paycheck to paycheck made do by shifting to a lower-paid job temporarily. This time around, people from higher income brackets are filling those jobs, if the work exists at all.

The number of homeless families in Indianapolis rose by 93 from January 2008 to January 2009, a 78 percent increase, according to the results of an annual snapshot by the coalition.

What's more, advocates for the homeless say the total of 213 homeless families, up from 120 a year ago, vastly understates the case. Following government guidelines, the count looked only at people living in shelters or transitional housing or who turned up in places such as hospital emergency rooms. Ignored were the hundreds of families living with relatives and friends.

One gauge of the real problem: Local schools reported nearly 3,000 children qualify for a federal program providing assistance to homeless students.

Shannon Glenn, executive director of the Interfaith Hospitality Network of Indianapolis, which coordinates a network of churches that offer temporary shelter for homeless families, said as shocking as a 78 percent increase sounds, it is "a very conservative number."

That's evident at shelters across the city.

The Holy Family Shelter in Downtown Indianapolis fills every one of its 22 family rooms each night. At the Dayspring Center on the Near Northside, which serves 14 families at a time, vacancies fill within hours if not minutes, said Executive Director Lori Casson. The Interfaith Network, where Spivey's family is being sheltered in converted Sunday school rooms, has a waiting list of 35 families.

And the look of the families is changing. "It has always been typical that most homeless people are single mothers with children," Glenn said. "But I'm finding full families -- moms and dads with their children -- that are being put into the streets."

Spivey hasn't given up hope. Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis plans to

bring him back when classes resume in August, and he continues to look for work. The churches have provided a nice stopgap.

"It's going pretty well," he said. "We have our good days, and we have our bad days."

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» To find out more about the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention, call (317) 630-0853 or visit the Web at chipindy.org.

» To find out more about the Interfaith Hospitality Network, check out familypromise.org.