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Charities struggle with increasing need

BY SARA B. HANSEN

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Last year was tough for Larimer County charities that provide emergency services to the poor and homeless.

The Food Bank for Larimer County served 30 percent more people in 2009 than it did in 2008.

Neighbor to Neighbor helped 25 percent more people with rental assistance and 50 percent more people who wanted to keep their homes out of foreclosure.

The Homelessness Prevention Initiative provided 56 percent more rental assistance.

The House of Neighborly Services in Loveland saw a 269 percent increase in emergency shelter requests and provided 50 percent more utility vouchers.

Realities for Children, an organization dedicated to serving the unmet needs of abused and neglected children in Larimer County by working with 18 affiliate youth agencies and programs, usually raises money a year in advance to spend in the coming year. In 2009, because it needed to provide more assistance, it spent some of the money it was raising for 2010 in 2009, said Craig A. Secher, Realities for Children president and founder.

"That's the first time we've had to do that," Secher said. "The demand has been so much higher."

Fortunately, Realities for Children has been able to meet its goals this year and even increased its goal and raised \$70,000 from its annual NightLights event. Realities raised \$55,000 through the event in 2008.

Heather Buoniconti, development director for the Food Bank for Larimer County, said the nonprofit has been able to meet the increased demand for food largely because of the national launch of a Wal-Mart retail pickup program.

The food bank now receives 12,000 pounds of edible food a month from Northern Colorado Walmart and Sam's Club stores. King Soopers also expanded its retail pickup program.

The food bank, which serves 12,000 families per month, distributed 7.5 million pounds of food in 2009, compared with 6 million pounds distributed in 2008.

The food bank is still getting help from food drives, but less is coming in.

"People are still trying to help, but it's not at the levels they've done previously," she said.

The same is true for cash donations; the food bank is still seeing a large number of donations, but the average dollar amount is down, Buoniconti said.

Neighbor to Neighbor has seen demand for its services soar in 2009, said Tracy Schwartz, resource development director.

The agency, which has 145 affordable apartments in Fort Collins and Loveland, now has a one-year waiting list for two-bedroom apartments and a two- to three-year waiting list for three-bedroom apartments or apartments that are accessible for people with disabilities.

The agency was able to help 96 percent of the people who came for help preventing foreclosure to keep their homes.

"We're seeing a whole new group asking for help. It's the unemployed or the under-employed. This is the first time they've been in this situation, and there's a direct correlation to what's happening with the economy," she said.

Money has been tight this year for the agency, and it had to suspend its first-month rent assistance program to help people who are homeless move into a new place. Schwartz hopes the agency will be able to restart the program this year.

Sue Beck-Ferkiss, executive director of Homelessness Prevention Initiative, said the agency has served 24 percent more households in 2009.

"We're seeing more people who are middle class who have lost their jobs or had their wages cut," she said. "It's not just the people skating on the edge living paycheck to paycheck."

The organization was able to meet that increased demand with help from stimulus money. It also is getting support from loyal donors, but many of them have reduced the amount they donate. "Everybody's feeling the pinch."

Glorie Magrum, executive director of House of Neighborly Services, said the agency saw demand climb 37 percent in 2009.

Financial support was good for the agency, but it doesn't have the staff it needs to meet client demand and Magrum doesn't anticipate having the money to hire more people any time soon.

"We're doing the best we can," she said.

And she doesn't anticipate the situation will improve much in 2010.

"I don't see any new jobs coming to Loveland in the near future," she said. "My hope is that the people who have been sustaining us will continue to understand that need and continue to provide that support."

Beck-Ferkiss also expects 2010 to be busy.

"We wish for abatement as does everyone else, but the trends I'm seeing are for continued crisis through most of next year. I hope I'm wrong."

Schwartz said Neighbor to Neighbor is preparing for continued high demand for its services in 2010.

"We have very streamlined overhead, so there's really not much we can cut here," she said. "If we're not able to continue getting money for our programs, we'll have to cut them back."

Buoniconti said the food bank will continue to work strategically in 2010 to meet continued demand, but the food bank wouldn't be able to handle another 30 percent increase in need.

"We're looking at ways we can expand our services," she said. "We're trying to have the most impact on people in need of food."

Secher hopes to see a better 2010.

"I knew 2009 would be tough; but I had this idea in my mind that, if we could get through 2009, the sun would be shining on Jan. 1, 2010," he said.

If service needs continue to climb, Secher said Realities will continue its efforts to meet that demand. In 2009, in addition to raising \$70,000 through NightLights, Realities distributed 450 bikes and gave away an estimated \$20,000 in holiday gifts to abused, neglected and at-risk children.

"We'll review where we are at the first of the year," he said. "There may have to be some belt-tightening. That may make us stronger and make us able to reach farther."

Additional Facts

Want to help?

> **Food Bank for Larimer County:** Make a donation online or learn how to hold a food drive at www.foodbanklarimer.org. Or send check donations to Food Bank for Larimer County, 1301 Blue Spruce Drive, Fort Collins, CO 80524.

> **Homelessness Prevention Initiative:** Send checks to Homelessness Prevention Initiative, 424 Pine St., No. 102, Fort Collins, CO 80524.

> **House of Neighborly Services:** Send checks to House of Neighborly Services, 565 N. Cleveland Ave., Loveland, CO 80537. Or donate online at www.honservice.org.

> **Neighbor to Neighbor:** Send checks to Neighbor to Neighbor, 1550 Blue Spruce Drive, Fort Collins, CO 80524. Or donate online at www.n2n.org/helpdonat exxzqL2402.cfm.

> **Realities for Children:** Send checks to Realities For Children Charities, 1610 S. College Ave., Fort Collins, CO 80525.

> **United Way of Larimer County:** Donate online at <http://www.uwaylc.org/donate.html>. Or send checks to United Way of Larimer County, 424 Pine St., No. 102, Fort Collins, CO 80524.