

Layoffs strain Calgary's largest shelter

Economic hard times raise demand

BY COLETTE DERWORIZ, CALGARY HERALD MARCH 9, 2009 10:04 AM

Calgary's largest homeless shelter is bracing for its worst year as former clients start returning due to layoffs and a declining demand for casual labourers.

Officials at the Calgary Drop-In and Rehab Centre, which takes in 1,250 people each night, are hoping to open another 150 beds by June to keep up with the demand for its services as the economy worsens.

"It's pretty scary," said Dermot Baldwin, executive director of the drop-in centre.

According to statistics collected by the province, the number of people using Calgary's shelters has remained steady this winter, and there are still some shelter beds available throughout the city on a nightly basis.

Alberta Housing and Urban Affairs will keep an eye on the availability of space as the economic downturn affects the shelters, said spokeswoman Barbra Korol.

But the drop-in centre has been at or near capacity for the past few months, and the staff has started to notice an increase in the number of returning former clients.

There has also been a drop in the number of people able to get day jobs moving furniture, working in warehouses or removing snow.

Drop-in centre clients Paul Roy, a journeyman carpenter who was laid off late last year, and labourer John Rumboldt said it's been difficult to find casual work since January.

The two picked up a couple weeks' work at the shelter to do some building maintenance.

"Just to do anything, it helps," said Roy, as he vacuumed up water to prepare the floor of the women's sleeping area for waxing.

In recent weeks, there have been six to 10 requests a day for casual labourers -- down from 65 to 75 clients who would find temporary work each day last spring.

"It's a pretty serious indicator or barometer of how, when the economy changes for the worse or uncertainty hits the political world, we're going to feel it," said Baldwin.

"We are now feeling it in extraordinary ways."

In addition, the shelter has this week noticed at least 10 former clients return after having stable jobs for the past three years.

"We are starting to see an influx of people who were away and had good stable lives and were paying taxes . . . now getting hit by this recession," he said.

The concern from the drop-in centre comes amid projections the economy will slip further into recession due to a slowdown in manufacturing, construction and consumer spending.

Despite attempts to spur spending by businesses and consumers, issues such as growing job losses show the downturn will likely get worse.

Experts say homeless shelters are often the first to notice economic bad times.

"This is a canary in the gold mine issue," said John Graham, an expert in homelessness and social policy at the University of Calgary. "The most vulnerable people are going to be hit the hardest and they are going to be hit first.

"So what we are experiencing at the drop-in centre or any other shelters is foreshadowing what is unfolding before us."

Other Calgary shelters are also preparing for tougher times ahead.

"As far as employment stats are concerned, we just did a survey and we saw a considerable drop in the past couple of months," said Jeremy Nixon, basic needs manager at the Mustard Seed's Foothills Shelter. "We're sitting at 49 per cent right now, which is significant."

In January, the shelter boasted that two-thirds of its clients were employed in permanent full-time jobs, part-time work and casual jobs from April to December 2008.

In the most recent survey, Nixon said it also found that 47 of the 300 people who completed the questionnaire had lost their jobs in the past month.

"That is a lot," he said.

Diana Segboer, executive director of Inn from the Cold, said their clients are also frustrated because they are unable to find work.

"Some of the dads or some of the moms will head out and try to hit some of the temp agencies or cash corner and they are coming back," she said. "We're seeing a lot of the single guys not getting any work.

"There's quite a slowdown out there."

Casual labour opportunities have also started to dry up at other temporary employment agencies -- which include everything from casual labour to white-collar work -- across Calgary.

"Since the beginning of the year, we are seeing a 20 to 25 per cent drop-off in requests," said Ken Vinge, vice-president of corporate development with Bowen. "We've talked about it around here as a big PVR (personal video recorder) machine that the economy is and somebody has hit the pause button.

"We haven't seen growth, it's pretty much been a stop in all type of employment.

"It's just been a gigantic pause."

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