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Diane Tomasik, communications manager, House of Hope

Charities having trouble meeting increased need



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House of Hope volunteer Mike Doherty sorts cans of food in the back of the non profit organization's building Monday in Stuart. The organization already has started to distribute items to families this holiday season and will continue to provide food and toys for people who have been receiving services from House of Hope.

BY LISA BOLIVAR
Correspondent

Many charities on the Treasure Coast are seeing fewer donations because of the economic downturn.

Charities are coping with their finances by either limiting their aid to those in need or by cutting back on staff hours.

None are meeting the increasing demand for services, especially with the increased need and planned efforts for the holidays.

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Stacey Malinowski, programs director at Mustard Seed Ministries in Port St. Lucie and Fort Pierce, said the agency provides basic social services and is not faring well.

"Financially, I haven't looked at this quarter, but last quarter we were down \$100,000," Malinowski said. "How do we cope? We buy less food for the pantry; we try to get churches to do more food drives; we don't pay as much toward (client) utility bills — we pay only half. We have had to cut back on the amount of services we offer."

Things are especially tough during the Christmas season.

"I will tell you it's devastating. People are very much in need, not just for meals

HOW YOU CAN HELP

House of Hope: Visit www.hohmartin.org or call (772) 286-4673 for donations, to volunteer or to find a House of Hope location near you.

Mustard Seed Ministries: Monetary donations, food donations and volunteer help is needed. To find out more call (772) 465-6021.

United Way: St. Lucie County, call (772) 464-5300; Martin County, call (772) 220-4472; and Indian River County, call (772) 567-8900.

The Salvation Army: St. Lucie County, call (772) 464-4846; Martin County, call (772) 288-1471; and Indian River County, call (772) 978-0265

and gifts, but they are still calling us for rent and utilities, and right now we are totally out with utility money," she said, adding that fewer donors are adopting families for holiday meals this year.

Malinowski said that while the ministry has scaled down the amount of aid it can give individuals, so far she has not had to cut staff.

"But we have cut hours," she said, and the organization no longer allows overtime for staff. Malinowski also is looking for

grants to try to make up the difference.

In Stuart, things are a bit better at the House of Hope, 2484 S.E. Bonita St., which is holding its own, said Diane Tomasik, communications manager. The nonprofit community service agency has a food pantry, clothes closets, emergency financial assistance and case managers who help people become economically independent and self-reliant.

"Individuals and foundations, even though they may be strapped themselves or their ability to give has been lowered, I think they have prioritized their giving to organizations that are safety net organizations like ours, which we are quite grateful for," Tomasik said.

An example, she said, would be the Community Foundation for Palm Beach and Martin Counties, which earlier this year created a safety net challenge grant. The new drive helps agencies that address hunger and shelter issues, she said.

"Because we do run food pantries and we do provide emergency financial statements for people to stay in their homes, and we were able to apply for a funding stream that didn't exist before, all of that has helped," Tomasik said.

But although House of Hope can help many in Martin County, the numbers of

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people asking for assistance is up about 80 percent, she said. As of Nov. 30, the agency has helped 598 people that is up from 346 the year before. It has allocated \$114,000 so far this year compared to \$74,000 in 2008.

While House of Hope freezers are full of donated turkey, chicken and ham, it is the rest of the year that worries Tomasik.

"We're keeping pace in regards to the holiday items, where we are behind is in our ongoing support of our programs, in emergency financial assistance which is a year-round program," she said. "This is an important point for people to keep in mind as we are finding people to be quite generous for the holidays, but the crisis for most of our families will extend beyond that."

The story is about the same in Indian River County where United Way CEO Michael Kint said the agencies he deals with are

struggling at best, although there are businesses such as CVS Pharmacy that have donated at higher-than-usual levels.

CVS in Vero Beach had fewer employees this year for its United Way campaign, but donations were up 18 percent, Kint said.

While Kint is seeing varying donation levels, Sharon Thompson at the Salvation Army in St. Lucie County said it has more clients than her agency can handle.

"What we need is more funding to help meet people's basic needs," she said, exasperated. "If I could have \$100,000 to start (the year) out with, it would be very nice, but even that wouldn't last that long."

"We have more people than I've seen in 30 years of doing this," Thompson said. "I am seeing more desperate fathers breaking down and crying in my office because they don't know how to handle this ... and this is going to all demographic groups, seniors aren't making it, single parents aren't making it, and two-parent households aren't making it."