

Need rises but donations drop at local shelters

By Dan Nakaso

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Sep 30, 2011

The Institute for Human Services saw a nearly 13 percent increase in people using Hawaii's largest emergency shelter last year, but donations are down and badly needed federal and state money will dry up after December.

Most of the new people using IHS services represent Hawaii's "hidden homeless" — people who are working but struggling, or families who had been bouncing from couch to couch until they used up all of their hosts' good will, said Connie Mitchell, the shelter's executive director.

"We're seeing a growing need while we're having budget cuts," Mitchell said. "When people are experiencing housing stress, people inch their way toward homelessness and begin doubling up with families that are already experiencing job losses. There are often conflicts and the person is asked to leave the household."

HOW TO HELP

Donations to the Institute for Human Services can be made by calling 447-2810, by visiting www.ihshawaii.org or by mail to Institute for Human Services, Attention: Development, 546 Kaaahi St., Honolulu, HI 96817.

To volunteer, email volunteer@ihs-hawaii.org, call 447-2842 or visit www.ihshawaii.org.

The IHS shelters in Iwilei are designed to house 200 single men, 100 single women and 25 families.

IHS needs donations to continue helping people such as Courtney Mynhier, 21, who has been living at the overcrowded IHS family shelter on Kaaahi Street with her 1-year-old son, Tristan, since the first of the month.

Before they arrived at IHS, Mynhier and her son had spent the past year staying at three different homes.

"If it came down to IHS or being on the street, this is better," Mynhier said Wednesday. "If we have no money, they provide us with three meals per day."

IHS also gave Mynhier diapers and clothes for her toddler "and they always have milk for him," she said. "It's nice."

Robin Goodhind, 41, has been living at IHS' family shelter with his 16-year-old son, Ikua, for the past 10 weeks after living on the streets of Kailua.

Ikua dug into a lunch of hamburger stew, rice, cinnamon bread and canned fruit Wednesday at IHS and said there are benefits to living in a homeless shelter.

"It's definitely better than being on the streets," Ikua said. "You've got a bed and a shower."

Being able to stay at IHS with his son is "safer, plain and simple," Goodhind said. "Enough was enough."

Goodhind hopes to collect himself at IHS, find work in Hawaii's struggling construction industry and enroll his son at Farrington High School.

Oahu's second-largest emergency homeless shelter — the 190-bed Next Step Shelter in Kakaako — has seen a similar rise in demand for services.

"We're always full and we've been full for a really long time," said Darlene Hein, director of community services for the Waikiki Health Center, which oversees Next Step. "Are there more people asking for services? Yes."

Next Step's leaking roof is being repaired. When it's fixed, Hein hopes the shelter can increase capacity to 230 to 240 beds.

"I have no doubt that as soon as we let more people in, Next Step will fill up," Hein said. "We always have people waiting to get in."

The biggest demand at IHS comes from families.

The Kaaahi Street shelter has room for 25 families, but 31 families are currently living there and have taken over some of the space reserved for single women.

A baby, named Felicia, was born inside the shelter last month and five more babies are expected by the end of the year, IHS's spokeswoman Kate Record said.

"We need more cribs," she said.

In a sign of Hawaii's harsh economic climate, even some of IHS' "bread-and-butter donors" who contribute amounts as little as \$1 have now become IHS clients, Record said.

The result is that IHS has more people to feed and shelter while donations are down 30 percent and the new year means the loss of two, two-year grants: One from the state Department of Labor and Industrial Relations provides \$80,000 to \$100,000 annually for IHS to help homeless people find jobs; the other from the federal stimulus provided \$1.1 million to help people stay in their homes by offering partial rent and deposits.

IHS used the federal stimulus money to help 215 households — representing 632 people — stay in their homes over the past two years, Mitchell said.

"They're working families who may have had their hours cut because of the economy or experienced a medical crisis and they were going to lose their housing," Mitchell said. "Now they're still in their homes. But the money ends at the end of the year."

Getting federal stimulus money to keep Hawaii families from becoming homeless was a bargain, Mitchell said.

"It's much more expensive to take someone who's homeless and get them back into housing again," she said.

Mitchell now worries that the drop in donations and state and federal grants will only increase the pressure on IHS, whose \$6 million annual budget already is down \$300,000 over the past two years.

"We depend on the whole community to help us," Mitchell said. "We've got to find money."