

## Emergency calls on food, foreclosures jump sharply

If Congress fails to extend benefits, R.I. situation can only get worse, official says

By **PAUL DAVIS**  
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

PROVIDENCE — The state's already-strained safety net could be torn by a future one-two punch, experts said Thursday.

Community agencies, food pantries and homeless shelters will be hurt by likely state and federal budget cuts next year, they said. The cutbacks will mean less food and fewer services for struggling Rhode Islanders, now at a record level.

The problem could get worse quickly if Congress fails to extend benefits for thousands of out-of-work Rhode Islanders, said Charles J. Fogarty, director of the state Department of Labor and Training. Those benefits expire in December.

"In the short term, we have some challenges and there are no easy answers," said Fogarty, one of a handful of speakers at a Basic Needs forum sponsored by United Way of Rhode Island at the Providence Marriott.

Out-of-work Rhode Islanders have already exhausted their savings and face a bleak job market, Fogarty said.

"It's not that people don't want to work. The jobs aren't there."

The jobless rate remains high and the state lost jobs in August and September, he said.

"At some point, something's got to give," said Michelle Wilcox, chief operating officer at Crossroads Rhode

Island. The number of people seeking help at the Crossroads homeless shelter reached record levels in August, September and October, she said. At the same time, the cost of services has far outstripped the agency's funding, she said.

"It's terrifying" to think about what will happen if the numbers continue to grow, and state and federal lawmakers cut funding further, she said.

"We keep appealing to a dwindling number of folks who can support us."

**Other agency** directors expressed similar concerns.

At United Way Rhode Island, the number of calls to the agency's 2-1-1 hot line is up sharply, said president and CEO Anthony Maione.

During the first nine months, the number of calls from Rhode Islanders seeking food jumped by 206 percent compared with the same period a year ago, he said. The number of foreclosure-related calls increased by 115 percent.

At the same time, social-service workers have endured cuts in pay, benefits and hours, said Westbay Community Action CEO and President Jeanne M. Gattegno.

The agency helped feed 1,600 households this year, she said.

"More than a third of them own homes. They are taxpayers" who have must choose between paying the rent or a utility bill, putting gas in the

car and eating, she said.

**Sandra M. Powell**, director of the state Department of Human Services, offered the one bright spot at the forum.

She said state workers recently streamlined the application process for food stamps, now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

During a one-week pilot program in Providence, state workers were able to provide benefits to applicants within a day or two, rather than a week or month, Powell said.

Agencies facing budget cuts and a growing client base "have no choice but to deliver services more efficiently," she said.

They must also work more closely with other agencies.

"We can't do business in the way that we've done it in the past 25 years. We don't have the resources."

Speakers Thursday said they are worried about cuts that will be made by a new bipartisan super committee in Congress.

The 12-member committee must find at least \$1.2 trillion in cuts spread over the next decade.

Their recommendations are due on Nov. 23, and could include changes and reductions to a number of programs, including SNAP, said Trinity Tomsic, deputy director for the Federal Funds Information for States.

pdavis@providencejournal.com  
(401) 277-7402

