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Homeless, transitional shelters notice donation drop

By JESSICA GROOVER

ANNAPOLIS — Several Maryland homeless and transitional shelters are worried as they've seen their donations drop in the wake of the nation's worsening economic climate.

The Light House Shelter in Annapolis, for example, ended the first quarter of its 2009 fiscal year Tuesday with 33 percent less individual cash donations than last year's first quarter.

"We're bracing ourselves for a long winter," said Harry Cole, the shelter's executive director. "It's a crucial time for us with the homeless population because of hypothermia."

Because most of the Light House Shelter's donors are everyday citizens, Cole said he thinks people are saving their money to deal with rising gas and food prices.

For the Frederick Rescue Mission, a transitional shelter for men overcoming addiction, charitable contributions for August were down more than one-third compared to August 2007, said Tommy Skaggs, director of development. Donations from all sources -- individuals, businesses and churches -- are "probably" 99 percent of their funding, he said.

The mission is still examining donations from September, but Skaggs said he expects to see the same trend.

The decline could not come at a worse time.

Emily Moore, the public relations and volunteer manager for Frederick Rescue Mission, said the mission's soup kitchen usually sees fewer people in the summer, but this year the numbers never went down.

With temperatures beginning to drop and shelters relying on more donations during the holiday season -- as much as 50 percent of all donations to charities come in during the holidays -- a dip in contributions leaves uncertain futures for shelters' busiest time of the year.

Stacy Palmer, the editor of The Chronicle of Philanthropy, said that charities are starting to worry about the commitments from donors, but not every group has noticed changes in donations.

"The worst is yet to come because charities usually lag behind the rest of the economy," Palmer said.

Changes in some funding sources show up more quickly than others.

Helping Up Mission, a homeless and drug rehabilitation center in Baltimore, has met its budget for the beginning of the 2009 fiscal year with funding, but it has not seen its usual growth pattern.

Executive Director Robert Gehman said that, because the Helping Up Mission is not funded by the government, it has not felt the pinch of the economy like non-profit organizations who receive government funding. He suspects that things will soon change.

"I'm constantly thinking about what-ifs," Gehman said. "Because salaries are the largest line item in the budget, it would mean cutting back on staff."

A smaller staff would affect the shelter's ability to serve its typical 400 people a day, Gehman said.

Frederick Rescue Mission has noticed an even more ominous change in its donor status.

"We've got some folks that once donated to us and now they're finding themselves in line for our services," Skaggs said.

As these shelters are preparing for a shaky future, some are already looking for funding solutions.

"We had to do extra fundraising efforts because we weren't sure how we were going to make it," Moore said.

Like Frederick Rescue Mission, other shelters have appealed to their partners and current donors for additional help.

And while these efforts have been successful, Skaggs is worried that these current contributions may substitute for the November and December donations that shelters and other non-profit associations depend on.

These groups said it is too early to predict if this drop in donations will continue, but they expect that if the economy does not get improve, donations will continue to decrease.

"We're going to wait and see now," said Skaggs.