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2,200 face end of jobless aid

Agencies, charities fear being overwhelmed

By Tricia Pursell

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The more than 2,200 Valley residents expected to exhaust their unemployment compensation by the end of the year may be fearing how they will survive without an income, while community service agencies are wondering how they'll be able to keep up with the cries for help from the rising numbers of those in dire financial need.

Government agencies remain hopeful the economy will improve before demand for assistance becomes unsustainable.

Individuals receiving unemployment benefits for 99 weeks, including all unemployment extensions, have reached their maximum and are ineligible for more.

The Department of Labor and Industry, Center for Workforce Information & Analysis, predicts that 2,227 residents in Montour, Northumberland, Snyder and Union counties will have reached their limit by the end of the year.

Confirmed numbers show that by the week ending July 24, there were 627 residents who received unemployment benefits for a full 99 weeks.

By the end of the year, these statistics show that 157,500 Pennsylvanians will be ineligible for further help through unemployment benefits.

"The numbers are harrowing," said Keri Albright, executive director of the Greater Susquehanna Valley United Way. "I don't know that our human service organizations could absorb the needs. That definitely worries me."

The United Way's 30 member agencies are already seeing an increase in the number of people calling for help.

Two years ago, Albright said she remembered being notified by teachers who had identified children and families that didn't have coats or shoes for winter.

"It's just going to get worse," she said.

"I'm afraid we will see an increase," added Major Sharon Cupp, of The Salvation Army in Sunbury. "As far as how much of an increase, I couldn't tell you that right now."

The Salvation Army is gearing up for its Christmas season, when the most help is requested.

"That's always a fear that you have as a service provider — whether or not you can provide enough services, especially once the holidays set in," Cupp said.

Sue Snyder, Careerlink administrator for Union-Snyder counties, said the agency works alongside the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry to identify those whose benefits are running out. Two weeks before the benefits expire, "we invite them in," she said.

There, they learn of the job search services that are offered through Careerlink.

No time to waste

Unfortunately, Snyder said, "A lot of people put it off."

Much of that may be due to the many extensions the government has offered for unemployment benefits, including federal legislation passed July 22 that extended Emergency Unemployment Compensation through Nov. 27, and 100 percent of federal funding of High Unemployment Extended Benefits through Dec. 4.

But not everyone is eligible for those extensions, Snyder said.

"They think they have some time," she said, "but it's tough to find a job now. It takes a lot longer than it used to. They really need to get focused."

With the increasing numbers of those reaching the end of unemployment benefits, Snyder said, "We always think that we're going to be swamped."

So far, the extensions have provided some relief.

"However, at this point," she said, "we're hearing there's a good possibility that there won't be more."

She encourages the unemployed to come to a Careerlink office as soon as possible, as officials are "hoping to mitigate the job rush."

Meanwhile, government agencies have worked together to create www.compass.state.pa.us — a website that state Department of Public Welfare press secretary Michael Race calls "a one-stop shop for people who need assistance and are not sure what they might be eligible for based on their income or their living situation."

Help on Web

Those using the website — an attractive option for those who don't want to deal with the stigma that may be placed on them by others if seen in a public assistance office — can fill out an application and see immediately what assistance they may be eligible for, such as cash assistance and food stamps through the Department of Public Welfare, reduced and free breakfast and school lunch programs through the Department of Agriculture and Department of Education, and available insurance for low-income families.

The United Way administers funds, left through trust accounts, for those people who qualify for help. However, Albright said they make referrals whenever they can to identify the resources available through other organizations in the area.

Albright encourages people to make donations to local emergency clothing and food banks, but also advises that donors be aware of the many organizations that are working for the long-term solutions to the needs in their communities, such as The United Way agencies and the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts.

Race said government agencies have been aware of the looming problem.

Based on the numbers they receive from the Department of Labor and Industry, Race said of the Department of Public Welfare, "We know what may be coming our way."

Whether the government agencies will be able to handle the possible onslaught of those seeking even more help by year's end is what Race calls a "crystal ball question."

"It all depends on how quickly the economy recovers and where," he said, adding that Pennsylvania is large and diverse, and some areas may rebound quicker than others.

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