

NEED

From page 1

more than double the number of clients this year.

"About 30 or 35," he said. "Many of them young families who just lost their jobs in construction."

The appearance of need may look different than it has in recent years, Owen said, so look closer: "Need is great and growing. Not all of the nearly homeless will be pushing shopping carts, even though they may be on the brink of demise..."

At Lehigh Community Services in Lehigh Acres, which aids that community with food and financial support, secretary Donna Marie Hamilton Ross said the evidence of struggle is seen in more than a person's clothes or cleanliness.

"The men that are coming in, the shame rolls off them," she said in her quiet, musical Jamaican accent. "They can't hide that, you know...The women are used to doing whatever it takes, but the men are not... God gave you the ability to ask for help: ask."

Director of LCS, Rae Nicely, said a man in her office the other day, who had come to pick up a box of food, began to weep.

"You're certainly not used to seeing a man cry like that," she said. "It's uncommon. I said, 'Are you having a meltdown? Because if you're having a meltdown, I'm going to have one too.'"

Well connected in Lee County

But the business of human need is a well-connected business, a worthy opponent for poverty, agency leaders say.

"I can tell you right now the community is fabulous, and extremely supportive," Nicely said. "...Many hands make light work. With everybody pulling together, we're able to get the job done, and it's a huge job, a huge undertaking."

Local agencies like CCCC, LCS and CCMi are sponsored by national agencies like United Way, regional ones like The Southwest Florida Community Foundation, and a web of local churches, grocery stores, hospitals, schools, business leaders, and individuals.

The 638 chickens and turkeys LCS gave out this Thanksgiving came from places like the Moose Lodge (gave 25 birds), the Lehigh Regional Medical Center (21), and New Life Assembly Pentecostal (50); Lehigh elementary schools Harns Marsh, Sunshine, and Mirror Lakes each gave about 5,000 cans of food as well; Christ Lutheran Church gave \$4,800 to the Cape Coral Caring Center, which is totally dependant upon food and cash donations from its community, in late November.

"In September we were in trouble so I went out into the community and begged and borrowed and tap danced and held out my hand, and they responded, very nicely," Cull said. "Little old ladies come to our door with two cans of soup in their bags..."



The Soup Kitchen manager Louise Watkins oversees lunch service for the needy. "Louise is like the first sergeant in the army and we're like the officers who don't know a thing," volunteer Sydney Scholfield said.

FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

It's very rewarding."

The Caring Center was organized in 1990 by the Cape Coral Ministerial Association and then provided support to 512 families. This year, the center aided 7,909 people, or 2,630 families. They distributed 13,552 pounds of food this November alone.

"And I suppose it will go on into next year, the way things are shaping up," Cull said. "But that's what we're here for."

The Southwest Florida Community Foundation, which provides area non-profits with 5.7 million annually in grants and donor advised funds, recently bought a new fundraising database called "the national foundation." It aims to further help these local agencies, Chief Program Officer Carol McLaughlin, said, with a database of 91,000 national foundations nationwide, which provide funding to charitable agencies. The service is free for them to peruse.

"Local funding stays pretty much the same," she said. "It stays pretty much finite. The problem is, because the area is growing in human service needs, the local funding cannot meet all the requirements, so the agencies need to be creative and resourceful, and go outside of the local funding, and by doing that tap into some of the national foundations to see if there are any grants available. It's difficult but not impossible."

CCMI is an umbrella organization which, besides the Soup Kitchen, also runs Meals on Wheels (providing over 300 meals a day to people who don't have the ability to prepare them) and Faith in Action, which shuttles the elderly to doctors appointments.

A Montessori pre-school connected to the Soup Kitchen costs parents about \$120 a month per child instead of the Montessori average price, \$650. There, about 40 children ages two through five do things like look at Matisse paintings, interact with birds kept in the classroom, and grow tomatoes by the playground outside. CCMi

will also be partnering with Lee County Memorial Health Systems in January to open a sickle cell clinic, Owen said.

Two doors down is Dunbar United Way Neighborhood House, which is set up like a doctors office and provides medical, mental and substance abuse treatments plus a host of other services; the doors are open to the public.

"The old way was you had to go to human services, and then to the social security office ... people would just give up," Owen said. "Now people can walk in off the street"

Programs like the Soup Kitchen or vouchers for the food pantry are only the most basic human service. A hot meal is a great help — for a few hours — but people who need food vouchers, or help with toys over Christmas (both available at the United Way house) generally have peripheral issues as well.

"There have been several documented cases where just being able to get the mail helped someone get a place," she said. "That's why my first question to you will always be 'What else do you need?'...While the key is to get them going on their own, those basic services have to be there immediately. If my pantry shelf is bare, I don't ever get to that next question."

Depending on your need, United Way House might provide things like food stamps, bus passes, job referrals, and ultimately, Owen said, hope for the future. All of the programs under CCMi once had separate locations throughout Lee County, but are now grouped together on Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.

"It's similar to a corporate merger, but the bottom line is people, not money," she said. "We're really committed to partnerships and collaborations...We want to offer a whole cache of services, because we don't want to manage suffering or put a band-aid on it, we want to end suffering."

But it's going to take some help from community leaders, Owen said. While guests at the United Way House do provide "a first step" towards mental health and substance abuse treatment, it is still a "key" issue.

"It's all about the mental illness and the drugs," she said. "Until our community addresses the mental health and drug issues, we won't be able to provide long term help...Another key issue is housing."

Owen said the year of 2007 meant, among other things, a 50 percent increase in requests for food from her emergency food pantry, a 50 percent increase in requests for service from the Dunbar United Way Neighborhood House, and a 30 percent increase in guests at the Soup Kitchen (yesterday being the first day ever, she noted, that the Soup Kitchen ran out of seats).

"The increase in needs we see are not related to the holidays," she said. "They're related to the economy... People are still hungry on the Fourth of July."

A trip to the soup kitchen

Last week, at the Soup Kitchen, 73 year-old volunteer Sydney Scholfield stripped

the skin and picked the meat from boiled chickens for the waiting hungry.

"I've seen the economy go up and down so many times," he said, unfazed by this October's 5.3 percent unemployment rate, the highest in 13 years. "The first thing people need when they get out of work is food. I think it's worse here in Florida, because a lot of people don't have relatives or friends who live here. In New Jersey where I come from, everybody has 25 friends."

As Scholfield kept on chickin' pickin', kitchen manager Louise Watkins checked the temperature on some fried chicken and taste-tested the potato salad.

"Good—but not as good as mine," she said.

"Louise is like the first sergeant in the Army and we're all like the officers who don't know a thing," Scholfield said.

Someone else in the kitchen, bent over a tray of chicken, looked up suddenly and commented, "There would be no soup kitchen without Louise."

"Can you get me 20 dinner rolls?" Watkins ordered, her voice cutting across a detritus of noise: a dish machine clicking on, volunteers gossiping about telemarketers and maintenance men, metal scoops scraping the bottoms of metal pans. "Yes, ma'am, 20 please."

Women and children are allowed to enter the dining room at 11 a.m., while the men wait outside until 11:30. That morning, there were about 30 men lined up outside, Watkins reported to the kitchen staff, some looking antsy in bright, raggedy stocking hats, peering in the window expectantly.

"I just got kicked out of my house because I couldn't pay the rent," one of them, 44 year-old Joseph Brown, said. Brown lost his job because of Epileptic seizures; then he was evicted. "I'm a garbage man and I ain't got no problem with it, except the ants."

Another man named Art, who turned 48 years old on Nov. 25, is homeless in Fort Myers; tall, lean and wearing paint splattered sweatpants that come down to his shins, he said it's easier to become homeless than you can imagine. He was finishing his chicken and salad.

"It's not hard at all," he said. "You just don't go home...You lose your job, have no family to support you, you're looking for love in all the wrong places, and all of a sudden..."

Art said his father lost his house in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and they went separate ways.

"Somebody told me I could find sandy beaches and pretty women," Art said, of why he came to Fort Myers. "When I first got here—I wanna be honest—all I saw were white people in Cadillacs."

Watkins walked by.

"I don't feel sorry for you," she told Art. "[Louise Watkins] is beautiful, man," Art said. "She's been there; you can't tell me what it's like to be homeless, unless you've been there. She has a big heart. She's reaping what she's sown."

Watkins, who is dark brown with curly gold hair, and legendary, said the volunteers and guests call her by all kinds of nicknames. She said call her what you want.

"The thing is, the food is good—not bland," 69 year-old volunteer Mac McCullough, said. "Louise makes a lot of it, seasons it, and tastes it. In fact, by the time the food comes out, she says she's full...We call her goldilocks."

Without fail, all the volunteers say the experience has enriched their life, if only for the time they're there.

75 year-old Pat Schmidt ("Going on 35," she said, "But when I go home I feel like I'm going on 80") volunteers Monday through Friday.

"First I pick up the fruits and vegetables at a Publix," she said. "Then I go to a Wake Up America [a Southwest Florida agency that collects goods from suppliers and redistributes them to local social service agencies] and pick up pastries and chickens...This is a great place to volunteer. It fulfills my life."

Not to mention the people she feeds. ■

SAVE UP TO 45% ANNUALLY
ON YOUR HOMEOWNER'S INSURANCE

With a **FREE**
Wind Inspection

W.B. Sanders Inc.
CR-C045781

MY SAFE FLORIDA HOME .com

"On Track to Save You Money!"
 State Certified WCE Contractor
239.931.3880
 To learn more or to apply for a free wind inspection
 log on to www.mysafefloridahome.com
ENTER CODE K-11