

Stimulus money will aid struggling renters

Charlotte's Community Link will distribute \$1.4 million to prevent deepening problems.

By Mark Price
msprice@charlotteobserver.com
Posted: Friday, Oct. 30, 2009

An initiative to help people facing a housing crisis in outlying counties has received \$1.4 million in federal stimulus money.

Charlotte-based Community Link will oversee the project, which focuses on both the homeless and struggling renters in Cabarrus, Davidson, Rowan, Stanly and Union counties. All but Union have unemployment rates higher than Mecklenburg, with Rowan the highest at 12.8 percent.

Floyd Davis, president of Community Link, says aid should start by mid-November. The money, awarded through the Department of Housing and Urban Development, is expected to help at least 150 individuals and families annually for the next three years.

"We have many people today who find themselves unemployed, not because they weren't a good worker, but because the business they worked for closed or they were laid off," said Davis, who applied for the HUD grant through the state in September.

"This program is to help them maintain housing and support services until they can get back on their feet. ...We can pay for their entire housing costs for up to 18 months."

Community Link will divide the recipients into two categories: 45 of them each year will be homeless who need housing; and 105 will be tenants who can't keep up with rent and utilities. They can stay in the program for no more than 18 months. Those who qualify will be given a case manager and other support, Davis said. Community Link, which helped 7,000 struggling people find affordable housing last year, will add two staffers for the program.

To find candidates, Community Link is partnering with six agencies in the five counties, all of which meet needs ranging from emergency shelter to help with utilities and rent.

One of those partners, Rowan Helping Ministries, runs a shelter in Rowan County. It recently saw a good candidate for the new assistance program in a family of six.

"The parents lost their jobs, lost their home, and had no place else to go," said Penny Bowman, program director for the ministry. "They stayed in our shelter for six months, until the dad did get a job."

Stanly County, where unemployment is 11.9 percent, just got its first emergency housing shelter in September. It has eight beds and was started by Homes of Hope, a partner in the new housing effort.

"We have a lot of average people in this county who are about to be homeless and if we could just find a way to get them through this next year, they could make it back," said Executive Director Skeet Ayscue.

In Cabarrus, the new program could put a dent in the estimated 240 families a month that face a housing crisis, said Ed Hosack, executive director of Cooperative Christian Ministry in Concord, another of the groups participating.

"We have three foreclosures a day and over eight eviction notices served a day," said Hosack. "We do not have the shelter and transitional housing facilities to respond to that. We know this program can have a tremendous impact in keeping some families in their homes, and helping others get back into a place rather quickly."

Cabarrus' problems with unemployment go back years, he says, citing the closing of Pillowtex in 2003, which wiped out 4,000 jobs in Cabarrus and Rowan counties.

The HUD money comes from the same federal pool that helped launch Project Hope in Charlotte in August. That \$2 million project is crafted as a long-term solution for homelessness, proposing to pull Mecklenburg families and individuals from shelters, put them in apartments and stabilize their lives over 18 months.

Davis sees Community Link's program as a regional extension of the goals championed by Project Hope.

"It makes much more sense in my mind to help people stay in housing, as opposed to letting them become homeless and suffer all the disruption to their lives in a time of crisis," said Davis.

"I'm happy that HUD is finally looking at prevention, and I think it will be more efficient and effective."