

"ACROSS THE BUDGET, THERE'S SO MUCH MORE NEED AND SO MUCH LESS FUNDING TO DO THESE THINGS."

[Cheri Ditzig, supervisor, Zion Township]



John Sfire, left, executive director of Faith Food Pantry in Zion Township, and volunteer Demetrio Pagan Jr. unpack a shipment of frozen chicken to be distributed at the pantry.

STEPHEN J. SERIO

SAFETY NET FRAYS

Only government entity required to help down-and-out, townships watch revenue fall, needs rise

BY MONÉE FIELDS-WHITE

Plunging property values and a rising sea of needy residents are creating a financial crisis for Illinois townships, the government bodies that serve a critical role in the state's social safety net.

The looming catastrophe was evident last week in Zion Township, 48 miles north of Chicago, where unemployed residents packed a former high school seeking job leads and training. A few blocks south, hundreds more flowed through a church recreation center, picking up grocery carts of food.

Cheri Ditzig, Zion Township's supervisor, says the township is serving twice as many down-on-their-luck citizens as last year. State law requires townships to provide general assistance, or financial aid, to needy adults. Many go beyond that, offering clothing or job training.

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Township resources strained

TOWNSHIPS from Page 3

In Zion Township, expenses are growing three times faster than revenue.

"Across the budget, there's so much more need and so much less funding to do these things," Ms. Ditzig says.

There are 114 townships in the six-county Chicago area; they are the only government entities required to provide social services. The revenue comes exclusively from property taxes.

"They're an important link because they do some things that other government entities don't do," says Karen Mossberger, associate professor of public administration at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Ms. Mossberger completed a study this month that shows the squeeze began last fall, with 30% of the 114 townships surveyed saying they were unable to meet demand for their services and 16% reporting they had begun to reduce or eliminate services altogether. The study was funded by the Chicago Community Trust.

Thornton Township cut its emergency financial assistance program and began phasing out help with energy bills two years ago as demand sapped its general assistance fund. The south suburban township maintains the general assistance

programs the law requires, but officials fear those could become overwhelmed this year as unemployed residents' jobless benefits expire.

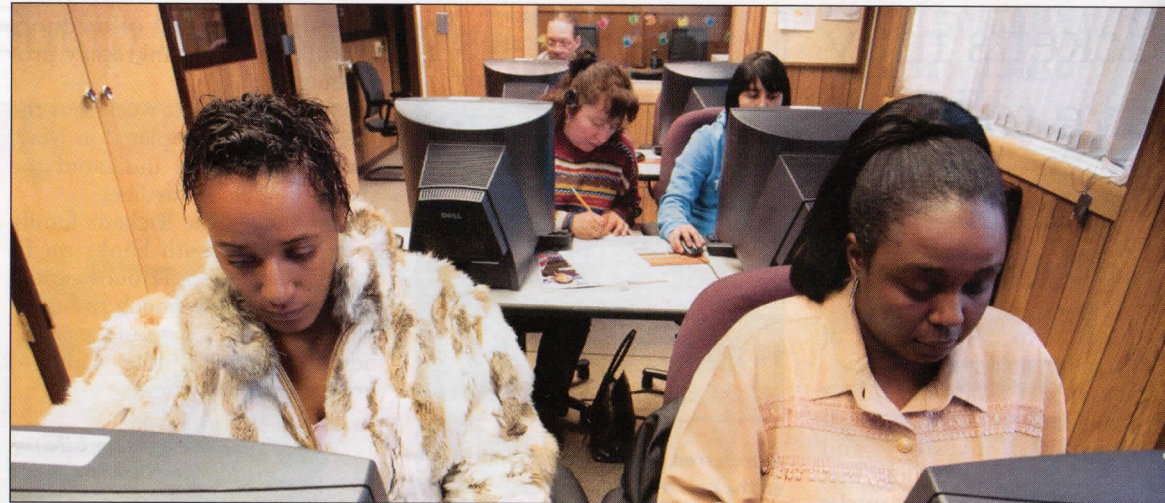
"As early as October of this year through next year, that's when we are going to see the biggest increase from what is happening in the economy," says Mark Myers, director of general assistance in Thornton.

West suburban Winfield Township saw a 27% jump in requests for emergency help with rent, utility payments, groceries and prescriptions during the fiscal year ended March 31. That led it to implement a \$300 cap on the assistance it extends to troubled families, who can receive help from the township a maximum of three times, in 18-month intervals. That saved the township \$29,000 and kept the program alive.

"We feel it's important, and it's something that's become expected," says Debby Juzwiak, general assistance director.

Nearly half of townships surveyed by UIC expect much more need for food assistance over the next three years, while about 40% expect to see more people seeking emergency and medical help. Up to a third said they anticipate insufficient resources to meet those needs.

Such sentiment has many townships scrambling to build coalitions with local non-profits. In Zion Township, Ms. Ditzig is putting



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Clients search for job postings using computers at the Zion-Benton Township Workforce Development Training Center.

the final touches on the community service center in the old high school, which opened in June with the support of various charities, including a church organization called Love Inc. The center now houses a workforce development program, a children's dental office and, soon, services like family medical care.

"With the economy the way it is, all agencies know that funds are going to be drying up and we have to be more willing to collaborate to make resources go further," she says.

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FIGHTING TO MEET NEED

In a 2008 survey, many of Illinois' 114 townships said they believe demand for their services will increase in the next three years and that they will not have the resources to keep up with it.

| Ability to meet need ▶ ▼ Type of service | We are unable to meet current need | In the next three years, need will increase ... | ... and we will be unable to meet it |
|---|------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| General assistance | 20% | 35% | 20% |
| Emergency assistance | 29% | 41% | 20% |
| Medical assistance | 37% | 40% | 35% |
| Food assistance | 27% | 49% | 27% |
| Senior housing | 16% | 34% | 19% |
| Housing help for homeless | 29% | 37% | 29% |
| Job training and search | 24% | 34% | 25% |

Sources: University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago Community Trust