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HEADLINE: Despite an increase in homeless students, school districts look to bolster enrollment, raise revenue



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Three months ago, the woman who rented a house to Roger and his two teenage sons could no longer make her mortgage payments.

So Roger moved the family to his shop in an industrial area of Stockton.

For months, the trio only ate for dinner what could be microwaved or grilled, and subsisted at school on free breakfast and lunch. The boys still take public transportation to Lodi High School every day, thanks to the free bus passes provided by the district.

When a client failed in July to pay Roger, who asked that his last name not be used, his boys became a statistic and have officially been labeled as "homeless students."

They are not alone. Due to a historic unemployment rate and record number of foreclosures, more families and children are finding themselves displaced.

Many of these students are sleeping in shelters, motels, spare bedrooms, and even the family van due to the economy. And some can't even be found, which is affecting school enrollment figures up and down the state.

"From an educational viewpoint, we see homeless students as anybody who has been displaced from their homes," said Mark Yost, who oversees homeless and foster student programs at the San Joaquin County Office of Education.

"They could be couch surfing or living in shelters ... or with aunts, uncles, grandparents."

Families with children are among the fastest growing segment of the homeless population, and most are under the age of six, according to the National Center of Family Homelessness.

The typical homeless family is headed by a single mother, usually in her late 20s. She has with her two or three young children, typically preschoolers.

2,800 homeless countywide

A study by the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children reported that more than 450 school districts across the nation had an increase of at least 25 percent in the number of identified homeless students between the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 school years.

Some feel the statistics could be worse this school year.

Of the estimated 2,800 people without homes in San Joaquin County, approximately 1,930 are children, according to the Office of Education. This number represents all school districts in the county.

"We're just now seeing the fallout," Yost said, adding that the statistics can change from one day to the next. A foster child who runs away from his or her placement, for example, is suddenly considered homeless.

He suspects the numbers are a lot higher. Often, local districts don't find out about family's situations until filling out enrollment forms.

"Many people do not like to share their situations until forced to. Then, when they do, we find many just need someone to talk to," Yost said.

How to get help

— Galt Community Resources has opened the Sunshine Food and Clothes Closet at Fairsite Preschool, 902 Caroline St. It is open Monday and Friday only, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

— In Lodi, the Salvation Army's Hope Harbor Center offers a variety of programs for homeless families, while Lodi House provides room and board to homeless women and their children with the ultimate goal to create self-independence. 367-9560.

— The county Community Development Department also offers programs available directly to homeless individuals and families such as the Shelter Plus Care Program which provides rent assistance for disabled homeless individuals. Supportive Housing Programs provide rent assistance and supportive services to homeless families and individuals to assist them in making a successful transition from homelessness to independent living. 468-3124.

— *News-Sentinel staff*

Due to declining budgets, this year, more than any other year, districts are looking for students to fill their seats. All California school districts have had to deal with diminishing perstudent funding from the state, and that can be compounded by shrinking enrollment like Lodi Unified has suffered.

Each day, Lodi Unified School District receives about \$32 per student, or about \$5,700 for the year, although that figure is expected to drop this school year. That money goes into a district's general fund and could pay for basically anything needed to educate students, from teachers to heating the classrooms.

After the first month of school this year, the district had 29,692 students, compared to 29,929 at the same time last year, according to Chief Finance Officer Doug Barge.

"We have a certain number of students who don't show up the first day of school and some who don't show up at all," he said.

The latest figures showed a slight increase since August, but still far below prior years.

Numbers are similar in Galt. Galt Joint Elementary School District superintendent Karen Schauer reported that on the third day of school, enrollment was already down by 49 students since last June when 4,157 were enrolled. It's dropped even more since then.

What to do about it?

In Lodi Unified, child welfare advisers at each school are responsible for tracking down missing students to bolster enrollment. The district has also installed a new data system to track the number of pupils.

Last school year, the district's schools saw a record number of homeless students enrolled, and chalked most of it up to foreclosures in the North Stockton area, people leaving the state due to job loss or the increasing cost of living here.

As a quick snapshot of the decreases, most of the enrollment plunge came from the district's North Stockton schools, where 423 fewer students were enrolled as of September, compared with last year.

At the time, officials blamed the high number on foreclosures and more people moving out of state, since districts across California are struggling with the same decreases.

The goal of getting students in their seats is such a big issue that the San Joaquin County Office of Education has created a countywide truancy taskforce. While not all can be blamed on homeless children, the group reports that roughly 3 percent of the student population is considered to be habitually truant.

When going door to door looking for homeless students didn't net the numbers the county was looking for, the Human Services Agency started penalizing parents when their children are deemed truant.

In order to get more students in school, Yost also personally reaches out to the local homeless shelters to talk about how to better serve their student populations.

"Circumstances can be overcome," he said, adding that his office is filled with compassionate people eager to collaborate with other districts facing similar problems.

In Galt's elementary school district, child welfare advisers last year also went door to door knocking on residences where former students were known to live. Many of the homes were abandoned, likely the victims of foreclosure.

This year, the district received a grant worth more than \$350,000 to help bolster the number of students attending its seven campuses and the high school district's three schools. It was written by Annette Lazzarotto more than three years ago, based on the area's high number of foreclosures and number of families living in recreational vehicles, shared housing or foster children.

"We really have such a need here," said Lazzarotto, the district's family outreach liaison. She plans to work with a yet-to-be hired liaison at the high school district.

During the 2008 school year, the elementary district tallied 529 homeless students, including those in preschool through eighth-grade. "That could include someone who is homeless and living in a car for one day," Lazzarotto said.

Or the single father and his three sons camping at Rancho Seco in a trailer without water and sewer hook-ups.

Or the pre-teen who had to move in with his grandmother, who has two adult children and their teenagers already living there.

Or families that are doubling, tripling, even quadrupling up in homes that are less than 800 square feet. Many are even living in one room.

These are all true stories of people Lazzarotto has helped in the last couple of months.

"The homeless population is hidden here in Galt because we don't have a homeless shelter," she said, adding that instead she hears about many of the families through word of mouth or local churches. "We've had homeless families and families living on the edge, and it's just been made worse with the economy."

More families being affected

Four months ago, Galt third-grader Erin Munoz, her parents and siblings, ages 2 and five months, had to move in with her grandmother. The family, who is considered homeless because they have been displaced, now resides in a single bedroom in a house where Erin's teenage aunt and uncle are still living.

Her mother, who asked that the family's real name not be used, hopes to be out of the situation by Christmas and is currently searching for a duplex.

She could not be reached for further comment as her cell phone has been disconnected.

Lazzarotto coordinates the district's efforts to keep its students stabilized and coming to school with donated supplies and backpacks. She also oversees family counseling and emergency outreach when families suddenly find themselves without anywhere to live.

"If they can't find a room at a motel, they will go down to Lodi or leave the area all together," Lazzarotto said. "Galt is a small town that doesn't have a lot of services."

Because of this, Fairsite school is reaching out to the less fortunate and even helped open a shop to collect clothes and food for the district's neediest.

It is only open Mondays and Fridays, and on the second day the need was apparent. Nineteen families visited and cleaned out the available food, according to Lazzarotto.

Figures show that more students than ever are on the federal government's free and reduced-lunch program. In Lodi Unified, more than 60 percent of the families are eligible.

Among them are Allan and Garrett, who had to move into their father's business three months ago.

They can't go off campus to eat lunch with their friends. "I don't have any money in my pocket," Garrett said.

Fallout not just about numbers

Roger's two boys recognize that, due to the economy, there is nowhere else for them to live. "He's doing this out of necessity," Garrett, a senior, said of his father. "If he didn't, we'd be on the street. Then he'd be arrested."

Roger, who has full custody of them, echoed the feelings. "I'm just fortunate I can move into my business," he said.

Still, it's not ideal.

When his sons miss the county bus at 6 a.m. in order to make it to school by 7:20 a.m. and Roger has to drive them to school, he has seen a student being dropped off in a moving van. He has wondered more than once if the family is living inside of it.

Although they appear upbeat and even thankful for their current situation, Roger's younger son, Allan, wishes his peers understood the family's situation. Just because his beloved T-shirt has a hole in it doesn't mean it's because he's poor, and the jeans he chooses to wear more than one day a week isn't because he can't do laundry, he said, adding that some assume he is poor and can't afford better. "It kind of hurts," he said.

Garrett added, "I want everybody to understand you can lose it all. I'll kind of joke about our living situation, but sometimes people take it too far. "I want people to know we're not any different than we were. We're just struggling more. It can happen to anybody."

To help pay his bills, Roger recycles scrap metal left by other tenants in his rented shop space. "It's either gas money or food money," he said.

This month, he had to choose between paying rent or the gas bill.

In the spring, it should get a little easier when Garrett heads off to join the U.S. Air Force. It's a path he said he chose because of available job placement once he's out.

'Happy family'

Allan admits that his participation in water polo has put additional stress on his father. After school, he spends the time between class and practice doing all of his homework. On those days, he isn't finished until 8:30 p.m. and county transportation has quit operating for the day, forcing Roger to drive up to retrieve his youngest — and sometimes his oldest, who will spend the afternoon at his girlfriend's Acampo house to save his dad a trip north.

The boys get home at 9:30 p.m., eat dinner and shower, only to start it all over again at 5 a.m. Gone are the days of getting up at 6:45 a.m. and riding their bicycles to school from the Elm Street house they used to rent.

"The harmony of living in a house is gone," Roger said, adding that the family's living condition has knocked a lot of the convenience out of life.

In the end, Garrett, who is sharing a king-size bed with his little brother, calls his family blessed.

"This is the first time our family has been stable," he said, referring to more than five years of moving and his parents ultimately divorcing. "We're still a pretty happy family."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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