

DATE: 5/6/09

SOURCE: USA Today

HEADLINE: Economic Casualties Pile into Tent Cities



Economic casualties pile into tent cities

Updated 5/6/2009 11:42 AM

By **Emily Bazar**, USA TODAY

PINELLAS COUNTY, Fla. — Jim Marshall recalls everything about that beautiful fall day.

The temperature was about 70 degrees on Nov. 19, the sky was "totally blue," and the laughter from a martini bar drifted into the St. Petersburg park where Marshall, 39, sat contemplating his first day of homelessness.

"I was thinking, 'That was me at one point,' " he says of the revelers. "Now I'm thinking, 'Where am I going to sleep tonight? Where do I eat? Where do I shower?' "

The unemployed Detroit autoworker moved to Florida last year hoping he'd have better luck finding a job. He didn't, and he spent three months sleeping on sidewalks before landing in a tent city in Pinellas County, north of St. Petersburg, on Feb. 26.

Marshall is among a growing number of the economic homeless, a term for those newly displaced by layoffs, foreclosures or other financial troubles caused by the recession. They differ from the chronic homeless, the longtime street residents who often suffer from mental illness, drug abuse or alcoholism.

For the economic homeless, the American ideal that education and hard work lead to a comfortable middle-class life has slipped out of reach. They're packing into motels, parking lots and tent cities, alternately distressed and hopeful, searching for work and praying their fortunes will change.

"My parents always taught me to work hard in school, graduate high school, go to college, get a degree and you'll do fine. You'll do better than your parents' generation," Marshall says. "I did all those things. ... For a while, I did have that good life, but nowadays that's not the reality."

Tent cities and shelters from California to Massachusetts report growing demand from the newly homeless. The National Alliance to End Homelessness predicted in January that the recession

DATE: 5/6/09

SOURCE: USA Today

HEADLINE: Economic Casualties Pile into Tent Cities

would force 1.5 million more people into homelessness over the next two years. Already, "tens of thousands" have lost their homes, Alliance President Nan Roman says.

The \$1.5 billion in new federal stimulus funds for homelessness prevention will help people pay rent, utility bills, moving costs or security deposits, she says, but it won't be enough.

"We're hearing from shelter providers that the shelters are overflowing, filled to capacity," says Ellen Bassuk, president of the National Center on Family Homelessness. "The number of families on the streets has dramatically increased."

'A change in the population'

Pinellas Hope, the tent city run by Catholic Charities here since December 2007, has been largely for the chronically homeless, some of whom suffer from mental illness or struggle with drugs or alcohol.

About 20% of its 240 residents became homeless recently because of the economic downturn, says Frank Murphy, president of Catholic Charities, Diocese of St. Petersburg.

"We're seeing a change in the population. ... We're seeing a lot more that are just plain losing their jobs and their homes," says Sheila Lopez, chief operating officer of the charity. "A lot are either job-ready or working but have lost their home because they were laid off, or their apartment, and now can't go to work because they're not shaven, they're not clean, they're living in a car, or they're living on the street."

The charity plans to expand the tent city and build an encampment in a neighboring county, an idea that has drawn objections from nearby homeowners and businesses.

Communities elsewhere are facing similar pressures:

- In Massachusetts, a record number of homeless families need emergency shelter, says Robyn Frost, executive director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. In mid-April, there were 2,763 families in shelters, including 655 in motels because the shelters were full, an increase of 36% since July, she says.

"We have a high number of foreclosure properties, and many of them are multifamily apartments," Frost says. "We were seeing a great number of families being displaced."

- Reno officials shut down a tent city in October after making more shelter space available, but new encampments are popping up along the Truckee River and elsewhere, says Kelly Marschall of the Reno Area Alliance for the Homeless.

The homeless include "a startling number of first-time homeless," she says. "We asked them what industries they were involved in. The majority were talking about construction, the housing industry, real estate. There was a direct correlation to the housing market crash."

- In Santa Barbara, Calif., 84 men and women sleep in their cars, trucks or recreational vehicles in 17 parking lots around the city, says Jason Johnson with the New Beginnings Counseling Center, which runs the RV Safe Parking Program. The city, which allows the use of three municipal lots at night, supports the program, says city parking superintendent Victor Garza. Last May, there were 58 participants and no waiting list. Now 40 people are waiting.

DATE: 5/6/09

SOURCE: USA Today

HEADLINE: Economic Casualties Pile into Tent Cities

"People's last refuge has become their vehicle," Johnson says.

Objections by residents

Pinellas Hope in Florida looks like a cookie-cutter subdivision, except that the orderly rows are of tents, not houses. Besides 250 tents, all of similar size, shape and color, there are 15 wooden sheds, 6 feet by 8 feet, that Catholic Charities built as shelters.

The charity plans to reduce the number of tents to 150 and erect 100 sheds, which are more durable, and build as many as 80 permanent studio apartments on the property, Murphy says.

His group also wants to open a campground for 240 homeless people in neighboring Hillsborough County, he says, primarily using wooden sheds.

Unlike Pinellas Hope, which doesn't border residential neighborhoods, the Hillsborough County parcel is across the street from a tidy 325-home subdivision called East Lake Park. There, opponents of the tent city have a website: www.stoptentcity.com.

Hal and Cindy Hart are raising three grandchildren in their home on the lake. The kids, 4 to 13, fish for bass, ride their bikes to friends' houses and attend neighborhood parties.

The Harts fear that large numbers of homeless people, some with addictions and criminal backgrounds, would loiter in the neighborhood. "We will not be able to let our grandchildren ride their bikes outside without constant supervision," says Hal Hart, 52, a paralegal.

The Harts agree that the homeless population needs services, but they think the emphasis should be on programs that will help families, not single adults.

Murphy says the diocese wants to address the neighbors' concerns and has lowered the number of proposed occupants from 500.

'A temporary situation'

Pinellas Hope, which has a waiting list of about 150 people, is attracting a growing stream of homeless men, women and couples. Families with children are sent to area shelters.

New arrivals must agree to rules, such as not using drugs or alcohol, and perform chores, Lopez says. They get mats, sleeping bags, toiletries, flip-flops for showers and lockable boxes in their tents to store valuables. Within one week, they must make a plan describing how they will work their way out of homelessness.

Residents are expected to move on within five months, but some stay longer. Campers have access to trailers with bathrooms, showers, computers, washers and dryers and a room of donated clothes. They get a free bus pass the first month and advice on writing résumés.

By day, some leave camp to look for work or ride the bus to pass the time. Others stay, watching TV in large communal tents, doing laundry or playing Monopoly. At night, an off-duty police officer patrols the camp, which is governed by curfews: 10:30 p.m. on weeknights and midnight Fridays and Saturdays.

DATE: 5/6/09

SOURCE: USA Today

HEADLINE: Economic Casualties Pile into Tent Cities

The camp bustles at dinnertime, when everyone gathers for a hot meal provided by churches and other organizations.

A year ago, there were 5,500 homeless people in Pinellas County, says St. Petersburg police officer Richard Linkiewicz, a homeless-outreach officer. This year, there are 7,500, including 1,300 children in homeless families, he says.

Many of the newly homeless worked in construction, a booming industry in Florida before the economic bust, he says.

David Grondin, 48, moved in on Feb. 7 and stayed for two months. A union carpenter, he graduated from the University of South Florida in 1999 with a bachelor's degree in fine arts.

He struggled as carpentry work and odd jobs disappeared. When his 1992 Saturn died in August, he could no longer get to jobs far from public transportation routes.

Frustrated by his inability to find a job in Florida, last month Grondin took a bus to Portland, Maine, where he's staying with friends and looking for carpentry work. "I was definitely middle class," he says. "I had a car. I got a paycheck every week."

Kevin Shutt, 53, moved into Pinellas Hope in March after he was laid off from his job waiting tables because diners "stopped coming through the doors," he says.

Shutt has decorated his tent with house plants, including a ficus tree his mother gave him nearly 30 years ago, and pinned Tampa Bay Rays and Buccaneers jerseys to the inside walls.

He tearfully recounts how he got kicked out of his apartment by a roommate when he couldn't come up with the rent. A former homeowner who made Caesar salads tableside at restaurants, now he can't get a job at Taco Bell, he says. "This is the first time in my life I ever dreamed about living in a tent," he says.

An optimist by nature, Shutt vows that his stay will be short. He has filled out more than 175 job applications and occasionally works for a friend doing canvas work on boats. "This is a temporary situation," he says.

A diminished outlook

Marshall, the former autoworker, has an associate's degree in electronic engineering and is less encouraged.

He remembers a comfortable life in Michigan, where he worked in automotive testing, owned a brick ranch-style home, made up to \$50,000 a year and played in softball leagues.

Companies he worked for started losing contracts a few years ago, and eventually the work dried up, he says. He sold his house and moved into an apartment, but by 2007 he couldn't pay the rent.

He came to Florida in August, thinking the job market was better. But he couldn't pay the rent here, either.

DATE: 5/6/09

SOURCE: USA Today

HEADLINE: Economic Casualties Pile into Tent Cities

At Pinellas Hope, Marshall searches online job sites or takes the bus to apply for work at McDonald's, factories and Wal-Mart. He gets \$45 a week selling his blood plasma.

"I have my résumé online. I go door to door. I make phone calls," he says. "I have not received one phone call, one e-mail. I thought with my experience and my degree, it wouldn't be this difficult."

Marshall feels ill at ease in the camp and has trouble sleeping, and not just because of the armadillos that burrow under his tent. "I'm scared," he says. "If I can't find a job, where do I go next?"

At this point, he has lowered his expectations. "I don't expect ever to make \$50,000 a year working in the auto industry, but just enough to survive, have my own place, buy my own food, my own clothes," he says. "What every American would expect."