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Job-assistance agency caseload on the rise

By LYNNETTE HINTZE/The Daily Inter Lake

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There's an air of urgency, a frantic feeling rising from the cubicles at the Community Action Partnership of Northwest Montana these days.

The nonprofit agency on Kalispell's Main Street is on the front line of helping people who have lost their jobs, or their homes, or both. Applications for assistance have almost doubled in two years and still are rising.

"These are difficult times, and the human pain and suffering we see is very real and tremendously sobering," Executive Director Doug Rauthe said.

Community Action Partnership is the new name for Northwest Montana Human Resources, and reflects the agency's original mission. Back in 1964, when President Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty and signed the Economic Opportunity Act, independently chartered Community Action Partnerships sprang forth as a way to strengthen communities, Development Director Lil Dupree said.

In Montana, partnerships were established in every county — including Flathead — in 1976 at the direction of Gov. Tom Judge, who encouraged renaming the partnerships human-resource agencies. That's how Northwest Montana Human Resources came into being.

"Human resources was the new buzz word then," Dupree explained. "Now it means something very different."

In fact, the agency has often fielded calls from workers wanting to get in touch with their company's human-resource department, she said, explaining the confusion of the old name. After a strategic planning process last year, the agency decided to go back to its roots, "to reaffirm that community action is what we're all about."

ACTION is the new buzz word.

"We've seen a 40 to 100 percent increase, depending on the program," Dupree said. "The demographics are shifting. We're still seeing low-income people looking for a way out. But now we're seeing people [from all income levels] for the first time having to access the social safety net."

Flathead County has the highest unemployment rate among Montana's largest counties, Rauthe said. It just topped 9 percent. The number of Flathead home foreclosures likewise is the highest in the state.

Even though other parts of Montana may not reflect the intensity of the national recession, "we're there," Rauthe said. "We're just a microcosm of what's going on everywhere in the country."

Amid the doom-and-gloom statistics, the Community Action Partnership strives to help people find hope, Dupree said. Through a dozen or more assistance programs, help is available, even if it's as minimal as offering printers



Community Action Partnership Development Director Lil Dupree listens to a question from her Free to Choose financial literacy class students at Faith Lutheran Church in Kalispell last week. According to Dupree, the class is "the only program that we know right now that is incorporating three important aspects to financial freedom: 12 weeks of literacy classes, a one-year mentoring program and alternatives to payday lending." (Allison Money/Daily Inter Lake)

and copiers to brush up a resume for a job search.

"We're somewhat backlogged, but we'll find ways to help," she said.

HELPING people pay their power bills and weatherize their homes are two key ways the agency offers assistance.

The Low Income Energy Assistance Program subsidizes a portion of a household's primary heating costs during the winter, and the income level has been raised to 175 percent of the federal poverty level. That means a family of four with an income of \$37,100 or less qualifies, Dupree said.

In 2007, 3,448 households in the four counties served by the agency (Flathead, Lake, Lincoln and Sanders' received \$1.6 million in energy assistance.

Through the weatherization program, homeowners can get low or no-cost materials such as door stripping and water-heater blankets to increase energy efficiency. Rauthe said he was pleased to hear President Barack Obama mention weatherization specifically in his proposed stimulus bill.

A new element of the energy assistance program is refrigerator replacement, a government initiative that replaces old, inefficient refrigerators for people who are over 60 or disabled.

On the home front, the Community Action Partnership offers emergency shelter assistance, transitional apartments for the homeless, housing counseling, federal rental assistance and senior home rehabilitation.

Community Action's mutual self-help housing program has been an effective way for hard-working families to move into homeownership, Dupree said.

To date, 104 homes have been built, 16 are under construction and 16 more are scheduled to be built at Spring Creek Subdivision. Families contribute 'sweat equity,' working at least 35 hours a week to help build all the homes in the group. A family of four earning \$26,850 would qualify.

Free volunteer help is available for tax preparation. Walk-in sites are available Fridays and Saturdays at Flathead Valley Community College, or taxpayers can call the main Community Action number at 752-6565 to make an appointment Monday through Thursday. A family earning \$42,000 or less qualifies.

More than a quarter of eligible households in the four-county area don't file for the Earned Income Tax Credit that could give needy families a big boost, Dupree said.

Employment and training programs are another busy arm of the agency. In addition to helping people refine their job-search skills, case managers work with participants to address barriers to employment. Helping people get their high-school diploma equivalency (GED), find adequate day care and reliable transportation are among the biggest needs.

A relatively new program, Free to Choo\$, led by Dupree, has been a rousing success, with full classes and waiting lists for the next class. It teaches people to take charge of their economic future and lead financial lives of choice, not necessity or even desperation, she said.

Rauthe said the agency expects to get funding through the federal stimulus bill to help handle the growing caseload. Right now it's a waiting game.

The agency has an average annual budget of about \$6 million, which is a mix of money from federal and state grants, contracts and private foundations.

The agency works with and advocates for other nonprofit groups, getting people to the services they need, be it food stamps or access, school-lunch programs or the Children's Health Insurance Program for those who have lost benefits connected with their job.

"We work closely with the shelters and food banks," Dupree said. "We're always asking, 'Who's got beds, who's got money?'"

"As a Community Action Partnership, we're not only service providers; we're system change advocates, Dupree said. "We do Band-Aids, but our mission is advocacy."

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