



## Service Provider Roundtable

### Meeting Emergency Assistance Needs in Johnson County, KS

#### The event

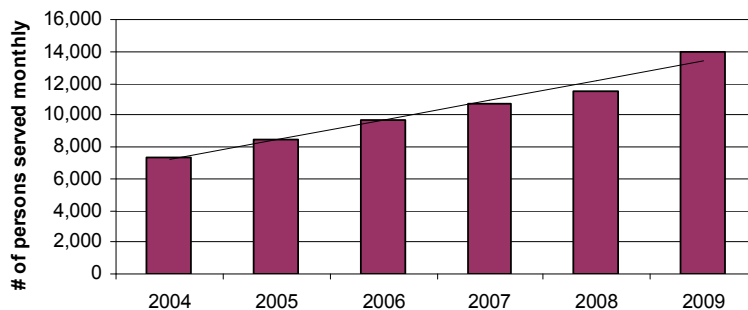
United Community Services of Johnson County (UCS) held its annual Emergency Assistance Roundtable May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010 with providers from both the private and public sectors in order to discuss the current need for emergency assistance among county residents. Emergency assistance is the provision of support to address life-sustaining basic needs such as food, utilities, clothing and shelter for those facing a financial or catastrophic crisis. This is in contrast to a case management model of support, in which providers and clients have an ongoing relationship within an organized, structured process with the goal of moving the client through a change process and toward self-sufficiency. Traditionally emergency assistance has been focused on a one or two-time infusion of resources to help an individual or family manage a crisis such as a job loss or medical emergency, and then return to self-sustainability. Emergency assistance providers are those who offer all of these supports, or some subgroup of them, and may represent public and private nonprofit organizations, including county and city level departments, faith-based organizations and

private community based groups. The current roundtable’s discussion focused on: 1) the changes providers were seeing in the need for emergency assistance, 2) identifying gaps in services or types of assistance, and 3) how as a community, organizations could more effectively respond to need among local residents.

UCS has a long been invested in assuring sufficient human services for all Johnson County residents and has facilitated a roundtable discussion on emergency assistance annually in order to enhance relationships among providers, improve collaboration and referral systems, identify emerging trends in need and service gaps, and plan for the future. One indicator of increasing numbers of families who are struggling and the parallel need for assistance is the number of families applying for and receiving food assistance from the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program). The average number of persons in Johnson County served monthly almost doubled between 2004 and 2009.

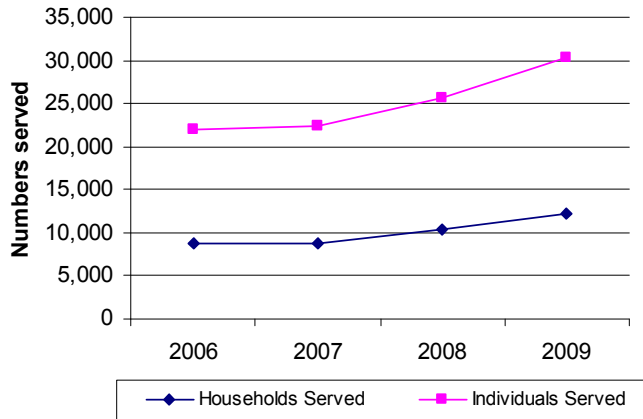
**Average Number of Johnson County Residents Enrolled in Federal Food Assistance Program**

(Source: KS Dept. of SRS)

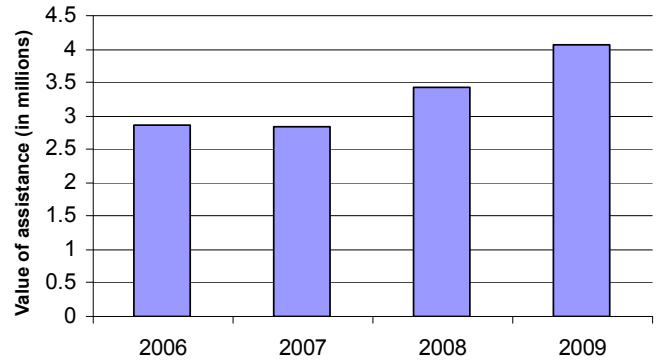


Similarly, the amount of emergency assistance provided to Johnson County residents has also grown dramatically, with both the number of individuals and the number of households served increasing almost 40 percent from 2006 to 2009. During the same time frame, overall population in Johnson County grew an estimated 5.3 percent.

**Emergency Assistance Provided by Johnson County Organizations**



**Estimated Dollar Value of Emergency Assistance Provided by Johnson County Organizations**



Supported by funding from United Way of Greater Kansas City for community planning, the roundtable discussion included representatives from a variety of sectors including departments of county government, private nonprofits, faith communities and state level programs. Karen Wulfkuhle, Executive Director of UCS, welcomed the twenty participants with a brief reflection on the history of convening emergency assistance providers in Johnson County. Participants had been sent a series of open ended points of discussion prior to the roundtable meeting in addition to being prompted to review the past year's service and request numbers at their organization. Valorie Carson, UCS Community Planning Director, facilitated the meeting and led participants through a two hour discussion of the three main topics, identifying existing issues and demand and generating possible responses or solutions addressing current and anticipated need.

### **What was said?**

Initially, group discussion centered on the tremendous increase in requests for assistance that organizations had received in this past 12 months, especially from families and individuals for whom this was the first time they had requested assistance. Observations centered around three areas of change: changes in the population that they were serving, changes in themselves and their organizations and changes in systems outside of the immediate community and the community itself.

### **What are emergency assistance providers seeing?**

- Changes in populations served
  - More people are coming to organizations and agencies for assistance
  - A greater proportion of the people asking for assistance are doing so for the first time
  - More of those asking for assistance were formerly considered middle class

- While the increase in numbers of people requesting assistance was greater from 2008 to 2009, the number of requests continued to grow further between 2009 and 2010
- Families/individuals seeking assistance are further behind/deeper in debt when they come for help than before, and organizations' resources aren't great enough to meet their needs or make a difference
- Changes in organizations and providers
  - Organizations have had to reduce the assistance they provide per request/family
  - Providers are interacting differently with those seeking assistance for the 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> time versus those who come back "all of the time"; they are starting to hold those who return repeatedly more accountable for why they are needing repeated assistance and for making changes to reduce their emergency assistance needs
  - Emergency assistance provision is trending towards mini-case management
  - For those using volunteers, the mean/median age of volunteers is getting older
  - As the number of first time or formerly "middle class" applicants grow, the amount of time and effort to serve them grows, as providers try to help them re-frame their expectations about their expenditures, budgets and choices, which may include shifting to a more frugal lifestyle
- Changes in the broader context/environment
  - Some city and private utilities companies have changed policies regarding conditions for turning on and shutting off service, size of deposits to access service and flexibility in working with clients to catch up on past bills which in turn has made it more difficult for those who get behind to regain service
  - Delays and decreases in state level assistance programs like LIEAP in 2010 resulted in many more calls for utilities assistance in March than in previous years
  - More of the general community is recognizing that they could be at risk for needing outside assistance and that they are not that different from those seeking help

In addition to observations about the changes providers were seeing among clients, their own organizations and the community, they also spoke of the need for referrals to legal aid, mental health programs, child support assistance, and medical care and prescriptions programs for those unable to pay. The gaps identified in community resources in the county were not new to those around the table. Included were the need for more affordable and emergency housing, homeless shelters for single individuals, landlords who are willing to rent to those who have been evicted, incarcerated or have a poor credit history, and the lack of sufficient alternatives to car-based transportation.

### **Challenges to providing emergency assistance in 2010**

The primary barrier/challenge for providers of emergency assistance was focused on how the "business" of providing emergency assistance was shifting – from one where providers are responding to individuals or families that come in once or twice seeking assistance for an acute bill or shortfall to one where they are responding to families who are seeking significant assistance due to a steep drop in income that is unlikely to return. This new way of doing business requires different skill sets and a significantly greater time commitment from staff

than before. Coupled with less staff in many organizations and greater demands on staff due to both numbers of people to be served and their level of need, providers are reviewing how the new kinds of need can be met with fewer resources and less staff. An additional skill set needed for many emergency assistance organizations was more bilingual/bicultural staff to better serve the growing non-English speaking populations.

Several providers reported incorporating typically prevention focused activities into their interactions with families and individuals seeking assistance once they had established a trusting relationship. Activities included educating or reeducating clients about how to budget, assessing spending for essentials versus luxuries, and planning for extended periods of less income in order to prevent emergency need from becoming a need for ongoing or long term assistance. However, all shared that this took significantly more time than traditional interactions with clients and that staff did not necessarily have the skill sets to meet the prevention and education needs of those seeking assistance.



Left to right: Jodi Hitchcock, Johnson County Human Services; Valorie Carson, United Community Services; Tamra Brandes, Catholic Charities of NE Kansas

### **What are ways to be more effective in response to current and future needs?**

The group brainstormed about how the barriers and challenges they were facing might be met. Two ideas emerged. One idea was that frontline workers would benefit from training in order to develop skills at quickly assessing/triaging an incoming family's immediate and longer term needs, assisting them in prioritizing spending and making necessary choices to prevent ongoing need for assistance. However, even with appropriate training, staff would still be spending more time than before with clients and needed innovative ways to reduce the time burden.

Another idea was to recruit highly skilled volunteers from either a pool of retired or unemployed professionals or from corporations looking to promote volunteerism to deliver prevention-oriented activities like budgeting classes. This would need to be done in conjunction with developing the volunteer training capacity of providers' organizations if they did not use a significant number of volunteers currently. The Johnson County Christmas Bureau, which relies

solely on volunteers offered the assistance of their volunteer trainer to help develop the infrastructure related to organizations utilizing volunteers effectively, such as how to recruit volunteers, the training needed, developing a structure for responsibility to staff, identifying roles that could be filled by volunteers and the staff who would manage their time. Many service providers expressed the challenge of relying on volunteers including the time investment in training versus the percent that continue to volunteer over time.

### **Next Steps**

In order to be responsive to the ideas emerging from the roundtable discussion, UCS will convene one meeting to explore the idea of expanding the role of volunteers and the capacity of emergency assistance organizations to use them, drawing on the expertise of the Johnson County Christmas Bureau and its director of volunteer training. If subsequent feedback indicates significant interest in this strategy as a way to meet the demands of reduced staff and increased need, UCS will consider the feasibility of convening additional meetings to explore how this strategy might be implemented.

Additionally, UCS staff will research whether local training programs already exist that might meet the need among front line emergency assistance providers to acquire the skills to quickly assess a family's or individual's needs and provide "mini-case management" that reduces their need for future assistance. If one is identified, UCS will convene a meeting with those organizations interested in training front line staff. If no such training programs exist, other training opportunities may be explored including seeking out potential resources to assist in training local emergency assistance providers.

**Participants** included Clararene Glover from the Salvation Army in Olathe; Shirley Kelso, Ellen P. Jones, and Tamra Brandes, Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas; Linda Rogers, Toni Hull, Stevie Morris, Jodi Hitchcock, and Nanette Bales, Johnson County's Multi Service Centers; Evelyn Van Kemseke, Shawnee Community Services; Chris Schultz and Lori Fitzgerald, Antioch Church; Barb McNeile and Barb O'Donnell, Johnson County Christmas Bureau; Brooke Nelson, Laura Breitburg, and Richard Odiam, Jewish Family Services; Lisa Erlinger-Teel, Johnson County Health Department, Denise Williams, Central Church of the Nazarene; and Peggy Kelly, Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services.