

Safety nets help those in county who face eviction

By Kathleen Wilson

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Ken Haley never saw much need for programs that helped bail out people facing evictions until he started worrying about the possibility himself.

"Nobody wants to tell their kids, Pack your bags, we don't have anywhere to go but down," the Port Hueneme resident and father of three said.

Laid off from his job as a security guard, Haley and his wife, Francine, could not make the \$1,275 rent for their two-bedroom apartment in August. So he was relieved when they got a reprieve from Project Understanding, a Ventura agency that maintains small funds to help people stay in their homes. By September, he had his job back and no longer needed the assistance.

Programs like the one that Haley used may expand as advocates try to end homelessness by preventing it in the first place. By marshaling social services and educating people about the need to quickly seek help, they hope to cut by half the estimated 2,000 households in Ventura County that annually become homeless.

Another program, like the one Haley used, has begun in Ventura, with Project Understanding, Catholic Charities and the Salvation Army administering the funds.

Organized by a group known as the Ventura Social Services Task

Force, the program has aided at least four families since spring, said Chairman Karl Keller.

"It's four that aren't on the street," he said.

Officials say the funds are meant to help Ventura residents faced with extraordinary setbacks avoid homelessness.

In July, for example, the program assisted a Ventura man who had lost his job after his employer's business closed. The man, whose wife is disabled, has now found another job. Another grant helped a family that got behind in bills after leaving a rented home because of mold, moving into a motel, then moving again to another rental.

The Ventura fund has drawn about \$10,000 in donations, half it from individuals and organizations and the other half from United Way of Ventura County. The goal is to raise \$50,000 to \$60,000 yearly.

Keller hopes to see similar programs start in other cities at a time when a coalition of government officials, faith-based groups, business people and others are seeking to end homelessness in 10 years in Ventura County. Several nonprofits have for years offered rental assistance, but officials say they still have to turn away huge numbers of people.

"We average about 50 calls a day just from the city of Oxnard," said Socorro Lopez Hanson, executive director of Community Action of Ventura County.

Rick Pearson, executive director of Project Understanding, said the gap between wages and housing costs means a large pool of people are at risk.

"The families we're looking at are families who have been just limping along and have an unexpected expense that pushes them over the

edge," Pearson said. "They have no cushion, absolutely no cushion."

Haley said he never expected to be caught so short that he couldn't pay the rent.

Both he and his wife are employed — she is a hospital admitting clerk; he works two jobs, one as a teacher's assistant at Oxnard High School and the other as a security guard at an area hospital.

They had carefully budgeted their money to get them through the summer vacation while school shut down, he said. But then he lost his second job temporarily when his state certification to work as a security guard lapsed.

With no savings or relatives who could help out, Haley said, he was frantic, depressed and couldn't sleep. His landlord knew about the problem and never threatened to evict him, but Haley says he still feared it could happen because apartments are, after all, a business.

Haley said he once thought people didn't really need this type of assistance.

"Since being on other side of the track, I think it's a worthwhile cause."