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Glover: In troubled economy, the county offers help and hope

By Federal Glover
Guest Columnist

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The headlines seem to capture it all: high unemployment, thousands losing their homes, investors worried, middle-class shrinking, recession lingers. But the doom-and-gloom stories are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the impacts our troubled economy is having on us.

Other headlines may not be making the front page but they are equally disturbing: domestic violence on the increase, the new poor, substance abuse on the rise, homeless population spiking, suicides up, more robberies and burglaries. The stories of hopelessness and despair of ordinary people rival the doom and gloom of the economic experts.

The economic downturn hits everyone in different ways: When the family next door has to move; or when you find yourself counting the days to the next paycheck; or you skip a meal so your kids can have something to eat for dinner; or your friends ask for a place to stay, just for a little while, they say, until they get back on their feet.

Perhaps what is most disturbing is that the safety net itself, the host of social services that help those down on their luck or those going through a difficult time in their life, is being shredded when it is most needed.

We've all heard about the cutbacks at the county agencies. The state is cutting its budget. The governor wants to eliminate a host of assistance programs. Less money must be shared with more. Beleaguered case workers take on more clients

than they can service.

Based on feedback from a number of county agencies and community-based organizations, a lot of people who were just getting by find themselves in the unfamiliar situation of needing public assistance for the first time in their lives. They don't know how to access the services and assistance that is available to them.

We are also hearing that oftentimes, well-meaning people who want to help their relatives, friends or neighbors, don't know where to turn.

The most readily available (but the most unpublicized service) is the 211 phone line, which could direct the caller to the desired service and the locations.

Following are some other starting points for the most basic needs for shelter, food and jobs:

General Assistance: Every county in California is required to provide relief and support to all residents who are not supported by their own means, by friends or relatives, by other public funds, or by other assistance programs. In East County, go to 4545 Delta Fair Blvd., Antioch, CA 94509 or call 925-706-4980.

Homelessness: The county runs a host of programs for those in varying degrees of losing a home or seeking shelter. A good place to start is the FERST Center at 400 O St., Antioch or call 925-778-3750.

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The Shelter Hotline is a toll-free number (800-799-6599) to call to access the Adult Interim Housing programs in Richmond and Concord. The Shelter Hotline is available daily between the hours of 9 a. m. and 5 p.m. This number is for Shelter Intake only. For other issues related to homelessness, including general information and referral to programs other than shelter, crisis intervention and requests for motel vouchers, call the Contra Costa Crisis Hotline at 1-800-808-6444.

Food assistance: We are lucky that there is a whole host of food programs and resources in East County. A number of churches and temples have their own food pantries for their congregants and some operate soup kitchens. There are also food banks for groceries and hot meals available at a number of other locales. In East County you can apply for food stamps at the Employment & Human Services Department offices located at: 4545 Delta Fair Blvd., Antioch or call 925-706-4980; or 151 Sand Creek Road, Brentwood, 925-513-3720.

Employment assistance: Job Seekers may call 1-866-EBWORKS for information or visit a One-Stop near you. In East County the county has two locales, 4545 Delta Fair Blvd., Antioch, or 925-706-4830; or 281 Pine St., Brentwood, or call 925-634-2195. Services are free to all.

In addition, the county offers assistance for specific groups such as the elderly, children in school, infants.

This Sept. 16, the county's homeless program, health service and the city of Antioch will host Project Homeless Connect from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Contra Costa County Fairgrounds, 1201 W. 10th St. in Antioch. The homeless will be connected with food, medical and dental care, substance abuse programs, shelters and more.

A couple of years ago, the project hosted a similar event at the fairgrounds and served 500 individuals. Cynthia Belon, who heads the county's homeless program, estimates that this year, there will be 900 individuals seeking services and assistance.

"More and more, we are seeing more families, couples with children," she said.

Unfortunately, that's a sign of the times.

Glover is the District V supervisor. Reach him at dist5@bos.cccounty.us.

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