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Low-pay workers, poor also feel devastated

Economic pain mounts

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The economic crisis caused by the World Trade Center attack has not trickled down to low-income New Yorkers — it has hit them like a tidal wave.

With thousands of people suddenly thrown out of work, soup kitchens and food pantries are overwhelmed. Charitable organizations are being pushed to the limit of their resources. And many low-wage taxpayers who have never before been jobless are struggling to make ends meet while waiting for emergency benefits to kick in.

Last week, the state Labor Department put the city's unemployment rate at 6.3% — about 215,000 New Yorkers. That's up dramatically from 5.8% in August. But it merely reflects the worsening economy. It does not take into account the catastrophe of Sept. 11, which could force joblessness up to as much as 8% by the end of the year and into double digits by the first quarter of next year, according to some economists.

Last week, 12,172 workers in the city applied for unemployment insurance, up from 5,826 for the same week the year before. This month, a state Assembly report estimated that some 500,000 jobs were affected by the attack. By any definition, that is a crisis.

Although welfare rolls dropped by nearly 12,000 from August to September, charitable organizations have warned the city to expect a deluge of new applications as a result of the attack.

The city Human Resources Administration would not provide figures on the number of people who have applied for welfare since Sept. 11. But David Jones, of the nonprofit Community Service Society, said potentially thousands of the people who recently got off welfare may now be forced back onto the rolls.

City, state and federal agencies are doling out a host of benefits to victims at the Pier 94 assistance center. But the aid, for the most part, is merely stopgap. And for many, it's a long time coming.

As Sheldon Daniel, a World Trade Center security guard who was injured in the disaster, put it: "I'm very grateful for the help, but it is frustrating to wait in line for eight hours only to be told that it will be four to six weeks before I get any benefits. I'm just about out of resources."



KRISTEN ARTZ

Westside Campaign Against Hunger's pantry is feeling pressure of 170 families a day seeking help instead of the previous 112.

The extent of the need is reflected in a dramatic spike in demand for emergency food.

Shortly after the attack, 80% of 47 emergency food providers in the city reported a significant increase in demand, with 70% reporting a critical shortage of food, according to City Harvest, the nonprofit group that stocks scores of soup kitchens and pantries in the city.

"Many people in my area have been laid off or are expecting pink slips," said the Rev. Henry Price of the Greater Mount Zion food program in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. His experience is being repeated at charitable organizations throughout the city.

Consider this:

- A survey by the Coalition Against Hunger, which represents 1,200 soup kitchens and food pantries in the city, found that 54% of its affiliates are helping families that lost a breadwinner in the attack.
- Before Sept. 11, City Harvest served 145,000 people a week. Now it's helping more than 200,000.
- At the University Settlement House on the lower East Side, there has been a fourfold increase in requests for aid since Sept. 11.
- The Westside Campaign Against Hunger on W. 86th St., which helped 112 families at its food pantry in July, is now struggling to feed 170 families a day.
- On Oct. 11, a month after the attack, police barricades had to be put up to control a food giveaway program at the Yorkville Common Pantry on E. 109th St.

City Harvest director Julia Erikson said: "Even before the attacks, many working families were having a hard time putting food on the table. Now we are on the verge of a very serious hunger problem in the city."

Complicating the problem were temporary computer disruptions in the public assistance system and widespread failures of the ATM-like electronic benefits machines, which rely on phone lines to deliver food stamps.

Among those hardest hit are New Yorkers in such low-paying jobs as messengers, building cleaners, dishwashers and security guards. Particularly suffering are so-called "secondary victims" — those who do not qualify for disaster relief available to people directly affected by the attack — and legal immigrants, most of whom do not qualify for food stamps, said Joel Berg, executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger.

Unable to meet their rent, many of the new jobless fear eviction. With the city losing 10,000 units of low-income housing a year, and with 110,000 families on waiting lists for the projects, the prospect is terrifying.

Typical is Josefina Rosario. A 37-year-old single mother of two young children, she had worked as a $200-a-week aide at the Helen Keller Foundation on Washington St., across from the World Trade Center.

Although she has always had marginal jobs, she had never been unemployed. But since the disaster, she has been to two city-sponsored job fairs, to no avail. Living on $50 a week in unemployment insurance, food stamps, food from the West Side Campaign Against Hunger and whatever she can borrow from friends, she says, "I'm scared that we will be evicted."

Her concern is real. Many landlords of low-rent buildings are struggling themselves.

"A lot of low-income tenants may already have paid their September rent and maybe some have saved enough to get by another month or so," said Frank Ricci of the Rent Stabilization Association, a landlord group. "But if there comes a day of reckoning, it will probably be in January or February.

"We're hoping that the city and the banks will be understanding. Otherwise, a lot of people will be suffering."

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