

Local

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'Desperation is setting in' for O.C.'s neediest



**YVETTE
CABRERA**
REGISTER
COLUMNIST

We hear the phrase constantly. These are "tough times."

Whether we call it a recession or a depression, many of us are feeling it in one way or another through pay cuts, furloughs, layoffs or buyouts. But just how bad is it out there for those hardest hit?

So bad that "desperation is setting in," says Maria Chavez Wilcox, president and CEO of the Orange County United Way.

So bad that many of the families

we read about last fall who were on the verge of losing their homes to foreclosure have lost their homes. Others are on the brink of running out of money. Some are looking for food to feed their children.

In most cases, this is where the county's nonprofits step in to help. But as the economy has sputtered onward, their caseloads have exploded while donations have dropped.

"Our agency partners, some of

them are almost at the point where they have to shut their doors," says Kristin Bush, communications manager for the Orange County United Way, referring to these nonprofit groups.

The situation is so dire that the United Way has made the unprecedented move of pulling \$200,000 from its emergency funds, and in April launched a campaign to raise

SEE CABRERA • PAGE 2

CABRERA

FROM PAGE 1

money for nonprofits focused on basic needs such as housing assistance, food and medical care.

Through its "Bridge the Gap" campaign, the United Way is asking foundations and individuals to match the United Way's \$200,000. The organization hopes to raise \$1 million by June 30 so that it can disperse the funds this fall to partner nonprofits.

So far, prospects look bleak. The United Way has taken exactly one pledge so far - \$50,000 from the Allergan Foundation, the charitable arm of Irvine-based health care company Allergan Inc.

"It's about children and families. It's about people who have been working, who want a job, who are begging for a job, and find themselves in a situation where they need a little bit of assistance so they can stabilize their families," says Chavez Wilcox.

"When people get desperate, it causes unhealthy behavior in a community," she adds.

Previously, the United Way has used its emergency fund for natural disasters. But with its nonprofit partners so financially strained, the agency's board of directors felt that the current economy warranted use the funds for the Bridge the Gap challenge.

What's more, as the funding and contribution squeeze has hit its member organizations, Chavez Wilcox says the local United Way itself has fallen short financially. The agency raised \$12.2 million last fiscal year for its Community Impact program, which funds other nonprofits. This year, with less than a month left in the fiscal year, contributions are down 28 percent.

"This is like no other time in our history," says Chavez Wilcox.

At Families Forward in Irvine, which offers temporary assistance with food and housing, the increase in need is enormous, says Executive Director Margie Wakeham. Over the past two years, calls for help have jumped fivefold, and are continuing to rise.

The callers most often are people with a long history of working hard, paying taxes and, yes, giving to charities. "They're primarily middle-class families where the bottom has just dropped out," says Wakeham.

Not only are these families financially stretched to their maximum on credit cards, they are increasingly desperate and frustrated, says Wakeham.

Not everything is gloomy. Families Forward has managed to meet the local need with the help of individual donations - families who skip a night at the movies to give a little to the organization; the Irvine farmer who, each week, drops off 10 crates of produce for the food pantry.

These *are* tough times. But for all the talk of massive bailouts and stimulus programs, it might be the smaller gestures of goodwill that will help our community bridge the gap.