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County plans to cut fund for programs that help the homeless

By Kalen Ponche

Local service organizations that help the homeless might have to rely more heavily on donations from supporters in the coming year.

County Executive Steve Ehlmann's proposed 2009 budget includes a 15 percent cut in contributions to the Community Assistance Board, which provides grants to local agencies that help the homeless and indigent.

Other agencies that receive funding from the county, such as the St. Charles Symphony, the Mid East Agency on Aging, the St. Charles County Fair and the Arts Council all received a 25 percent reduction in funding.

The cuts are part of a \$55.2 million county budget that's about \$1 million smaller than last year, due to a projected decline in sales tax receipts. Each county department director cut at least 5 percent from his or her budget, eight employees were laid off Oct. 30 and 12 other jobs that are currently unfilled will not be filled next year.

"We felt if we were making cuts and laying people off and defunding positions, that it was only right that we reduce the amounts of funding that are going outside county government to outside agencies," said Bob Schnur, the county's director of finance.

Schnur said they realize that as the pressure grows for the county to trim costs, the demands on social agencies grow.

Almost every day Paul Kruse, founder of the non profit organization First Step Back Home, fields 15 to 35 calls from people who can't pay their rent, don't have transportation or recently lost their jobs.

Kruse's organization got a \$21,000 grant from the Community Assistance Board, a substantial part of his \$90,000 budget. The CAB gives grants to programs that provide shelter and assistance to the homeless. The board gets funding from permit and license fees and from the county's general fund.

Kruse said the grant allowed him to help more people at a time when many are losing their jobs.

"God has just blessed this ministry like you can't believe," he said. "That's helped anyone from giving them gas for their car to paying some utilities to helping them with their rent or mortgage. Most of it, though, goes for motel rooms."

Last year, more than \$700,000 was given in grants to 16 different organizations, including Sts. Joachim and Ann Care Service, the Salvation Army and Crisis Nursery.

But this year, the board may only be able to give out \$545,000 in grants, in part because revenue from fees, permits and licenses is expected to decline. Additionally, the board will receive \$60,000 less from the general fund.

Youth in Need last year received more than \$56,000 in funding from the CAB, said Pat Holterman-Hommes, who is senior vice president of Youth in Need.

"I guess any decrease in funding would result in a decrease in the number of people that we're able to serve," she said. "That would include the older homeless youth we serve as well as families with young children we assist with housing and other crisis needs."

Agencies like Youth in Need are dependent on funding sources such as the Community Assistance Board, she said.

She said the economic crunch might make it more difficult for people to donate to agencies.

The County Council will meet to discuss the county budget Monday at the County Executive Building, 100 N. 3rd Street in St. Charles.