

Charities share FEMA aid

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Ten Bergen County charities that help low-income residents pay rent and utility bills and provide emergency food are getting nearly \$500,000 from the federal government.

The grant is the county's share of the National Emergency Food and Shelter Program, operated by FEMA. This year's allocation is up 25 percent from 2008, based on an increase in the county's "misery index," a federal measure of unemployment and poverty.

"The underlying reason for the increase is not something to be happy about," said Tom Toronto, president of Bergen County's United Way, which administers the grant.

In Passaic County, members of the FEMA oversight board will decide on March 12 which charities get grants. Earlier, the federal agency awarded \$380,536 for emergency assistance, an increase of nearly a third over last year's allocation

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for Passaic.

The Passaic County United Way administrators that county's FEMA funding, and Caroline Schneider, program assistant for the group, said the money will be distributed by the end of the month.

Some of the Bergen County charities are concerned that, with the increased demand for their services brought on by the recession, the federal grant may not even get them through the year.

"Last year, the FEMA money, in addition to the other funding we get for homelessness prevention, got us into December,"

said Patricia Espy, executive director of the Center for Food Action in Englewood. CFA will receive the largest chunk of the 2009 grant. This year, she said, with the increased number of clients calling the center, it may run out of the funds by the fall.

"The FEMA increase is about 7 [percent] or 8 percent, but the increase we're getting in requests for help is much more than that," she said. "We're already running out of some of our other grant money. As of Feb. 20, we had \$1,313 left from our Community Development grant to help pay rents, and all of that is already allocated. Normally, that lasts through July."

In addition to having more people seeking help, Espy said the funds are being used up faster because rent, utility and food prices continue to rise.

Toronto said the Obama administration has raised the possibility of using some of the federal government's economic-stimulus funds to provide charities with a second round of FEMA grants.

"The misery index is a snapshot taken around September," he said. "Conditions obviously worsened in the last quarter dramatically. We'll know what direction the federal government's going to go in a week to 10 days."

The allocation for Bergen County's United Way will be distributed through the agency's Compassion Fund, but Toronto said the program will need extra cash this year. Toward that end, the United Way's board has also taken what Toronto said is the unprecedented step of authorizing the agency to spend up to \$200,000 from the non-profit's reserve fund to provide emergency aid.

"It's a recognition on their part that we don't want to turn anyone away," he added. "We're seeing more and more people come in for help who are more and more desperate."

