

Benicia Community Action Council: Solutions to Share



Solano County

Provider Background

The Benicia Community Action Council (“Benicia CAC”), founded in 1967, is a non-profit organization comprised of concerned citizens, dedicated volunteers and experienced staff members who offer a broad range of support services to the economically disadvantaged in the small city of Benicia in Solano County. It is the only full service social service homeless assistance center in the city. The aim of Benicia CAC is to provide various direct services, professional guidance, resources, and referrals to those striving for self-sufficiency. Whether delivering hot nutritious meals to home-bound seniors or helping low income youth take advantage of on-the-job training opportunities, the Benicia Community Action Council stands ready to help meet the needs of this growing community.

Benicia CAC estimates that they serve up to 10% of Benicia’s population, comprised largely of the City’s low-income and working poor. They also serve homeless families and individuals, as well as seniors.

Community in Context

In late 2009, Solano County has the 14th highest foreclosure rates in the country and continues to be hit hard by high rates of unemployment.

In Solano County, people who have never before relied on government assistance are lining up for help. In June 2009, unemployment hit 11.3%, with a loss of 1,200 jobs between June and July 2009 alone. An estimated 41,700 people have become uninsured due to loss of employment. Social services, such as CalWORKs, Food Stamps, General Assistance, and MediCal have seen an immense increase in caseloads and applications. California’s most recent state budget action last month will trigger yet another round of program reductions at both the County and City level.

Economic Impact

Some of Benicia CAC's contracts with the city, county, and state have been lost due to California's severe budget cuts. For example, the agency had a county contract for Welfare to Work that gave them 1200 referrals from the county annually. However, with only one day's notice, the entire program was red-lined. When asked if the recent economic crisis has increased the demand for services, Ms. Frances Kelly Poh, Executive Director of Benicia CAC, reported that there was a noticeably higher need for food and other services from families. Benicia CAC is now providing food assistance through the USDA program and the local Food Bank for 81 families and is serving food to another 100 families per month.

Unfortunately, the agency is having a difficult time meeting this recent growing need and has been running out of food before the end of each month. Ms. Poh explains, "more families are coming than in years past because the government has cut their SSI benefits, because someone lost their job, or because their home was foreclosed upon." Benicia tries to partner with other agencies and shelters in the county, even sometimes driving clients to other cities if there are open shelter beds.

The agency has seen different types of needs for services this year. Ms. Poh explains that the community saw incredibly high utility bills this past year, forcing families to choose whether they pay for electricity, pay their rent, or buy food. Benicia CAC is trying to meet the needs of the people it serves by providing services such as rental and utility assistance but is coming up against a shortage of funds to meet the increased needs of the community.

In the past two years, Benicia CAC has wondered if it would have to close its doors many times.

The agency has had to meet these growing needs of its community with less funding and less staff. The agency has had to lay off half of its staff, and has had to cut everyone's hours (except for the Executive Director's hours) to 20-30 hours per week. As a result, the agency is now closed on Fridays. To meet this challenge, it has tried to be creative in finding volunteers and staff hours through other avenues. For example, the agency has worked out a program with Solano Community College that provides a staff person through its work-study program. It also has a program through the Worker's Investment Board that has a grant to employ transition aged youth within the agency. The agency is also a place where people can work off their community service hours. Many people from the community have wanted to volunteer their time, but Benicia CAC has had difficulty in finding enough staff to supervise them.

Despite these grave cuts in staff time, funding, and agency hours, through hard work and creative problem-solving, Benicia CAC, acting as the lead agency, has been able to provide the services described in last year's NOFA as well as make its match requirements. However, it has not been actively doing as much outreach to homeless individuals as they have in the past since they do not have the capacity to serve more

"This morning, the agency had people standing in a line out to the street waiting to get food at the food pantry--14 families came to get food within 45 minutes." – Frances Kelly Poh, Executive Director of Benicia CAC

people. The agency does plan to open a 6 bed transitional housing facility by January of 2010.

Current Funding

Benicia CAC tries to obtain funding from diverse sources. It is partially funded by City of Benicia through Benicia's Department of Human Services, and receives \$1,300/month for the HUD Human Assistance Center, approximately \$20,000 a year from the nearby Valera Refinery, a \$12,000 United Way grant for rental assistance for this year only, and about \$5000 from Kaiser to help with the senior meal program. It also receives a large block of money through the San Francisco Chronicle's Season of Sharing Program, which provides the first month's rental assistance to people who qualify for the

program. Ms. Poh notes, "this is private money and it comes with requirements, so a recipient can only use it once in a lifetime and they must be able to maintain the next month without assistance." The agency has had to turn down certain grants because they are for program services and do not include enough money for program administration. Benicia CAC has also applied for funding through the American Recovery and Rehabilitation Act.

Benicia CAC's Main Funders:

- City of Benicia (Dept. of Human Services)
- HUD Human Assistance Center
- Valera Refinery
- United Way
- Kaiser
- SF Chronicle's Season of Sharing Program

Solutions

If Benicia CAC was paying market-rate rent instead of owning its facility, it might be out of business by now.

"Owning property is a very helpful situation for non-profits," suggests Ms. Poh. This is a good long-term strategy for agencies as market-rate costs continue to rise. Benicia also has some savings that is not only helpful in case of dire need, but also a source of income from interest.

Benicia CAC turns to the community for donations with greater urgency now. The agency has a regular newspaper column in which they ask for things that are needed, such as food and clothing items. Recently, the community has been very helpful in donating an abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables from their gardens.

People came in to ask for help months before the holidays since families experienced a very difficult winter.

Benicia CAC continues to try to diversify its funding in order to stay afloat and continue to provide these much needed homeless and low-income assistance services. They continue to look for new privately funded grants, despite finding that businesses such as Bank of America and Bank of The West are no longer giving out as much money as they have in the past. The agency recommends working with private funders because these grants often have less restrictions and reporting requirements.

Ms. Poh plans to involve the Board of Directors more directly in fund-raising strategies. She notes the importance of developing and maintaining a strategic plan examining what services are needed and what the agency can actually perform.