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## Recession pushes teens, young adults to the edge

By Corey Williams

Associated Press Writer / February 8, 2010

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DETROIT—On one of the coldest days of the new year, Antonio Larkin found himself without a place to stay -- again.

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So the 22-year-old called a familiar number and was greeted by a familiar voice: "You wait there. We'll be there to get you."

When outreach manager Stephanie Taylor and other staffers from Covenant House Michigan pulled up, Larkin was standing in the gray snow outside his ex-girlfriend's apartment building; his world's possessions in three, beat up travel bags.

Larkin is among the untold thousands of Detroit's teens and young adults struggling to get by in a disastrous economy that has left their families without jobs or homes. Making matters worse is the organizations that help them are grappling with tough financial issues of their own.

Some are cutting programs, others are scaling back on how many people they serve, but none of them is giving up.

"The neighborhoods we go in are the ones we know are very distressed ... burned buildings, abandoned buildings, areas that are high in crime," Taylor said. "Those kids need to know that we love them and we care about them and we're here to help them. We need to go into areas that others might be afraid to go in."

Covenant House serves youth between 13 and 22 and their contributions totaled \$2.7 million in 2009 -- \$1.6 million less than the \$4.3 million raised in both 2008 and 2007. It has cut out some GED preparation courses, but continues to provide 75 emergency and transitional beds, officials said.

And then there's the kind of help they give to people like Larkin.

He first stayed there months ago, but was kicked out for disciplinary reasons. He then began "couch-surfing" -- staying with other relatives or friends.

The day he called Taylor at Covenant House, Larkin's girlfriend had kicked him out.

"If I only had stayed at Covenant House, I think my life would have been much better," Larkin said. Covenant House has been working to find him a new place to stay, but the resources out there aren't as plentiful as they were before the recession struck.

Other groups in the city are hurting, too.

A shelter for young girls has cut staff and reduced its beds from 30 to 20, said Lindsey MacDonald, fund development manager for Alternatives for Girls. Its annual dinner raised about \$125,000 in 2006. That dropped to \$87,000 two years ago, before plummeting to \$34,000 in 2009.

Nationally, it's estimated that up to 1.5 million teens and young adults are homeless. There could be tens of thousands in Detroit because of the city's

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enormous economic and social problems, according to Wayne State University psychology professor Paul Toro.

Nearly one in three working-age adults is jobless in Detroit. Job cuts -- many tied to the failures of General Motors Corp., Chrysler LLC, Ford Motor Co. and other manufacturers -- have led to thousands of home foreclosures. The poverty rate is more than 33 percent and climbing.

The 84,000-student Detroit Public Schools projects it will serve 3,894 fitting the federal homeless classification by the end of the school year. That's up from 2,976 in 2008-2009, and 2,326 the year before, according to school district records.

Finding those teens and young adults can be tough, Toro said.

"Kids under 18 living on the streets in Detroit is very rare," he said. "You have to really look hard. You can go to other places, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle, and you can find them all over the place."

Instead of seeking out the few public shelters that cater to teens, most are dropping in on cousins, aunts and friends. When welcomes wear out, they move on to other sympathetic acquaintances.

Milwaukee, like Detroit, is another rustbelt city with a declining manufacturing base. The 83,000-student Milwaukee Public Schools is serving 2,100 homeless students, although that number is expected to rise by June, said Janis Shogren, district homeless coordinator.

Milwaukee Schools had 2,725 homeless students in 2008-2009, 2,378 the year before and 2,296 in 2006-2007.

"And that's only the tip of the iceberg. These are the families who come to our attention," Shogren said.

Baltimore City Public Schools, also similar to Detroit in size, has identified 1,057 homeless students so far this year. Last year, 1,357 were served. Those numbers only may be a third of the students who actually are homeless, said Louise Fink, director of Interagency Support for the Baltimore district.

"If mom's home is foreclosed and she moves across the street into an aunt's house, they are homeless," Fink said. "Students who want the kind of services we can give them, they will identify themselves. If they don't want our services, they don't bother." ■

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