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By **Rita Price**

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Despite its nationally recognized shelter system and relatively low unemployment, Columbus can't seem to curb a rising rate of family homelessness.

Trends here are running opposite a general decline nationwide, according to both local data and recent reports from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The question is why.

"We'd like to have an objective researcher look at what is going on," said Lisa Courtice, executive vice president for community research and grants management at the Columbus Foundation.

She said the foundation has convened meetings among shelter-system leaders and agency providers to discuss what she called "alarming increases" in families with no place to go. The next step, Courtice said, is to develop an outline for research on the families and on the system set up to help them.

"The shelter understands people as they come in for services," she said. "What happened before that? We'd like to understand more about the journey."

HUD reported last month that the estimated number of homeless families nationwide has declined by 15 percent since 2010. But in the Columbus area, according to HUD estimates, family homelessness during that time increased by 7.6 percent.

That report is based on an annual count of homeless people conducted throughout the nation on one day in January. Locally, the Community Shelter Board also compiles full-year counts, and those figures are more staggering.

The number of family households served in the emergency system is up 79 percent over the past three years, to 1,570 families in fiscal year 2014.

Recidivism also is surging. The shelter board said the number of families returning to shelter within two years stands at 26 percent, compared with a 12 percent rate reported last year.

Michelle Heritage, the shelter board's executive director, said there are no easy answers.

"Really, the homeless system is an indicator of the economic health of those who are in the lowest socioeconomic status," she said. "We're the emergency room, and folks are coming into the emergency room at a higher rate."

Low-wage jobs, a lack of affordable housing, welfare cuts, mental illness and addiction are all factors, as they are in most other big cities.

Columbus has a well-known family shelter system, advocates say, and that could attract larger numbers of families seeking help. The YWCA Family Center has long been running at double or triple its 50-family capacity.

A second family shelter, to be operated by Volunteers of America, is to open next year in the Van Buren Center shelter west of Downtown. Van Buren also has new shelter areas for men and women without children.

"We are concerned," said Angela Stoller-Zervas, the director of the YWCA Family Center. "The families we

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see struggle with the capacity to have enough income to pay bills — for a lot of reasons.”

The system no longer has transitional housing, so families often leave the shelters after relatively short stays of about 24 days and move directly to housing. There also is less funding for longer-term help with rent.

“It does vary, but for the most part, people are leaving with a deposit and first month’s rent,” Stoller-Zervas said.

Heritage said the typical family entering shelter is a single mother in her late 20s with two kids; average monthly income is \$645. Thirty-six percent have at least one family member who is working.

Courtice said the research will be detailed in its analysis. No timeline has been set.

“We should really look at the way in which the system is running right now, in the way you would if you had an outsider looking in,” she said. “We feel a sense of urgency. But we want to get it right.”

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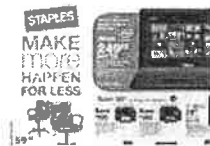
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