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Incredible demand for services to keep Utahns from homelessness

By Matthew D. LaPlante
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For months, staff members at the Salt Lake Community Action Program had been turning people away. There simply wasn't enough money to help the increasing number of families living on the edge of homelessness.

But there was hope on the horizon: \$8.4 million in federal stimulus funds, scheduled for release on Oct. 1 to fund homelessness-prevention programs across Utah.

And on Monday morning, the program opened its downtown Salt Lake City doors to a line, hundreds of people long, of residents hoping to qualify for help finding a new home -- or holding onto the one they have.

By Tuesday afternoon, the program's housing director, Sharon Abegglen, had realized there still wasn't going to be enough money to fill the tremendous need.

"If we served everyone who came through our door on Monday, we would be out of money already," said Abegglen, whose program is helping to facilitate the spending of about \$4.5 million designated for residents of Salt Lake County.

The federal funds were supposed to last three years.

Abegglen said that her program has seen a substantial demand for services this year -- including people who have been longtime homeowners but now are seeking rental assistance.

Hoping to make the money last, and provide the greatest long-term impact, the Community Action Program is targeting the funds to those who only need short-term help. For example, a family breadwinner who lost his job and is behind on rent would qualify if he has secured stable employment, making his situation unlikely to be repeated.

That means many of those who defied the cold to stand in line on Monday will likely be turned away.

Given the strict rules governing who qualifies, it's unclear what will happen to David Shupe. The 80-year-old Sandy resident, who is blind in one eye and has lost most of his vision in the other, was working as a grocery store greeter until the recession prompted his store to eliminate some of its full-time positions.

In consolation, Shupe was offered a 20-hour-a-week job bagging groceries.

"I wish they could have given me 30, 35 or 40 hours, but I took what they offered me," he said proudly. "And now I'm the best damn blind bag boy they've ever had."

But the money isn't the same. And Shupe said he's been falling behind on his bills.

"I'm just hoping there's an opportunity that they can help me out," he said as he stood outside the program office.

Abegglen said her staff is still busy sorting through Monday's applications. Those who qualify and can verify their situation is dire may be getting support within weeks, she said.

But it will be several more weeks before the program will be ready to take more applicants - and it's uncertain how much they'll have left to give at that time.

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More information

» For more about the Salt Lake Community Action Program, visit <http://www.slcap.org/>.

» For an earlier *Tribune* report on the new homelessness-prevention funds, please click [here](#).

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