

With bad economic forecast, safety nets need mending

By Federal Glover

Guest Columnist

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COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR David Twa painted a bleak picture for the immediate future of Contra Costa County, the state and the nation. Speaking at a recent breakfast event in Pittsburg, he told the audience of business and community leaders that the economy will get worse before it gets better.

The good news, he said, was that we can expect an upturn around 2012 — four years from now.

The bad news is in the next four years, the county — the entire country, in fact — is going to have to endure a deep, deep recession. The holiday season, which is supposed to be a time of mirth, atonement and reflection, makes the contrast with the hard times people are enduring even more stark.

Wall Street and the big automakers can look toward government for help. But whom can the ordinary person on Main Street turn to? Whether any of that relief money will filter its way into East County is uncertain.

My staff and volunteers delivered more than 600 turkeys this past Thanksgiving as part of my annual Gobbler Giveaway. The sad fact was there was such a heavy demand for the birds. If I had a thousand turkeys, it wouldn't have been enough, said the agencies who distributed them.

The irony is that as times get worse, there is a greater need for the services the county offers. The state's unstable budget has ripped apart the safety net you hear about.

Because the state cut back funding for social services the county may have to let go 200 people working in the Employment and Human Services Department because of a loss of \$18.5 million in state funding. Social workers who investigate abuse against children and older adults will be hit hard. Programs that help pregnant teens and teach parenting, teen pregnancy and parenting, how to find a job, counseling in domestic violence cases, substance abuse screenings and other programs.

Making things worse, funding for nonprofits that help fill the service gaps for the vulnerable is drying up. This means that many low-income individuals and families will see less charity this year. Organizations such as the Center for Philanthropy at Indiana

University estimate that charity will decline \$8.7 billion during the holidays.

Perhaps symptomatic of the worsening economy, calls to emergency hot lines are up. Calls from East Contra Costa to the Contra Costa Crisis Center rose 82 percent more in October this year than in November 2007, including a 126-percent rise in Antioch. There is no hard data but it is easy to make a connection between those desperate calls and to the number of foreclosures. East County is the center of the foreclosure crisis in the Bay Area.

But here and there, you can see the lights start to twinkle on like the lights on the Christmas tree. Highschoolers collect money for a women's shelter, kids collect pennies to give gifts to faraway soldiers, the Sheriff's Office in Bay Point sponsors a dinner and shopping spree for area youth, the Community Outreach Center in Antioch feeds hundreds of homeless, Not Just One Church Outreach Ministry (about East County 50 churches participated) delivered food and a hot meal to thousands of low-income and homeless people at the Antioch Fairgrounds earlier this month, county workers — even those who are worried about their jobs — are donating to the Food Bank so that other families can eat.

In East County, there are hundreds of unpublicized examples of individuals and groups doing good work for the less fortunate.

Tragedy strikes and ordinary people respond. Last year, statewide, 6.5 million volunteers contributed nearly 900 million hours of service.

It will take all of us to pick up the slack as our local, state and federal governments struggle through the financial quagmire we're currently stuck in. We've gotten so used to government being the safety net that many of us have forgotten the old-fashioned sense of responsibility of taking care of our brothers and sisters. We're fortunate that in East County that value has not been forgotten in this season of caring.

Merry Christmas! Happy Hanukkah!

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