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HUD cuts funding for area's homeless ABOUT THE PROJECTS

January 12, 2008 12:36 am

BY AMY FLOWERS UMBLE

The federal government gave \$1.5 billion to community homeless programs around the country this year, more than it has ever given.

But for the first time in at least 13 years, the Fredericksburg area won't get a share of that money.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development annually gives Continuum of Care grants to social services groups serving the homeless.

Since 1995, Hope House, a Fredericksburg shelter for homeless women and children, has received a CoC grant.

Hope House received almost half of last year's grant, or nearly \$60,000 to help women find permanent homes and to send homeless children to summer camp.

Last year, the George Washington Regional Commission received money for the first time to set up a program to track the homeless.

HUD awarded the Fredericksburg-area CoC \$117,225 last year. At the time, HUD spokesman Leland Jones said most grants are renewable.

"Our general approach is that locals know how best to use resources," he said.

And, "unless they take the money and start throwing it off bridges," the assumption is the grants will continue as long as the projects continue, he said.

So Fredericksburg-area CoC members can't figure out why they're not getting any HUD money.

Brian Sullivan of HUD confirmed the Fredericksburg area is not getting money this year. He said the application process is competitive, with more than 450 CoCs in 3,900 cities and counties applying for money. He said grant applicants may question the HUD decision, but he wouldn't comment on it to The Free Lance-Star.



A mother and her son eat dinner at Hope House, which until recently received federal help for the homeless.

"We don't talk to the CoCs through the press," Sullivan said.

Erik Nelson, Fredericksburg's senior planner and head of the CoC, said HUD isn't talking to him either.

Fredericksburg's CoC members usually deal with Richmond's HUD office, Nelson said. That office doesn't deal with the CoC grants, though, and couldn't answer any questions.

Bob Wilson, executive director of the GWRC, expressed similar frustration. "if I called HUD in Washington, I could spend months in that effort and not get anywhere."

Wilson, Nelson and Pamela Garrett, executive director of Hope House, plan to contact congressional representatives to get answers.

Nelson said he's not taking the rejection as a final answer for now.

"This is silly," he said. "We've got a first-class operation, and HUD isn't talking to us, so we're going to put children on the street? I don't think so."

Some CoC members said a poor rating from HUD may have affected the grant process. In September, a HUD official spoke in Fredericksburg and said the area's CoC had the lowest ranking in the state.

Sullivan of HUD wouldn't confirm the ranking, except to say the CoC process is highly competitive.

But Garrett said the low ranking "absolutely could have led to" the lack of money.

Garrett said she's taken the problem to the Hope House board. She's trying to find a solution, but so far, the only answer may be more creative fundraising. Hope House recently completed its biggest fundraiser, the annual Festival of Trees, brought in \$10,000 more than the year before.

Garrett says she will make sure families get the same services Hope House has always provided.

"This year, 47 children came through here who were homeless," she said. "What are they going to do if Hope House can't fill that need?"

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Last year, the Continuum of Care grant was used for three projects assisting the Fredericksburg-area's homeless:

Helping women move into permanent housing: Hope House used the money when women graduated from its two-year program. The once-homeless women got money for the first month's rent, security deposit and setting up utilities.

Sending homeless children to summer camp: About 20 youngsters from Hope House and the Thurman Brisben Center, a regional homeless shelter for men, women and children, went to camp.

Setting up the Homeless Management Information System: Fredericksburg is ready to launch this computer program that tracks the homeless and the services they use. It is supposed to cut down on abuse of the system and to help find needed services for clients. The George Washington Regional Commission recently hired someone to run the HMIS.

The area CoC represents Fredericksburg and the counties of Stafford, Spotsylvania, King George and Caroline.

--Amy Flowers Umble

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