

## Hope for Homeless Families

### Loudoun Program Helps People Move Out of Shelters

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Despite its status as one of the most affluent communities in the country, [Loudoun County](#) has experienced a rapid increase in homelessness.

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the number of homeless people in the county grew from 29 in 2005 to 170 in 2008, the highest percentage increase among jurisdictions in the metro area. Most of last year's cases could be attributed to foreclosures and unemployment, officials said.

"We're not seeing what people consider a traditional homeless population, but a mix of families from different income levels that are becoming homeless," said Linda Pfeiffer, president and chief executive of INMED Partnerships for Children, an Ashburn-based nonprofit organization that serves Loudoun children and families through a number of programs.

Last month, the organization received a \$100,000 grant that will allow it to expand a year-old program called Opening Doors, which provides job placement, education, child care and other services to families with young children that are living in homeless shelters or transitional housing.



Cecilia Díaz-Yap, who meets with 11 homeless families each week, visited the Loudoun County Transitional Housing Center in Leesburg on Monday to meet with a homeless single mother of three in the computer lab. (By Catherine Cheney -- The Washington Post)

"We really are about generational change," Pfeiffer said. "If you focus on these kids who are at risk, that will really change things for the future."

INMED officials said they think the numbers compiled by HUD are too low and do not take into account people doubling up with friends or relatives or staying on the move. Opening Doors has served about 60 homeless people in Loudoun since it was launched in June 2008 with a \$50,000 grant from the Freddie Mac Foundation. The recent \$100,000 from the foundation will provide services to an additional 140 people, according to INMED's figures.

"If you stabilize a family, you can break cycles for generations to come," said Hope Stonerook, assistant director of the Loudoun County Department of Family Services, referring to INMED's approach of focusing on families with children.

Cecilia Díaz-Yap, a housing case manager and family support worker for INMED, meets with 11 homeless families each week. On Monday afternoon, she visited the Loudoun County Transitional Housing Center in Leesburg to meet with a single mother of three who has been homeless for nearly a year and a half. Residents of the center have their own bedrooms but share kitchen space.



Cecilia Díaz-Yap, a housing case manager and family support worker for INMED Partnerships for Children, meets with a 31-year-old mother of three who became homeless after an incident of domestic violence. (By Catherine Cheney -- The Washington Post)

The 31-year-old mother said she became homeless when she left a man who threatened to kill her child. She spoke on the condition that she not be identified, citing the domestic violence threat in her past. She said that since becoming involved in Opening Doors, she has gotten a steady job at a retail store and that her children are doing better in school.

"Before I sat down and talked with Cecilia, I didn't think about the next step," the mother said. "INMED helps put goals into perspective, helping you make little goals before you can reach your big goal, which for everyone here is getting your own house."

INMED officials expect the homelessness figures for Loudoun will continue to rise as more residents living paycheck to paycheck lose their jobs. The problem is exacerbated by the lack of affordable housing options in the county, they said.

"We all see this train wreck coming, with all these people who are on the edge," said María Elena Vásquez, director of another INMED program, called Healthy Families Loudoun.

Vásquez said that INMED and the Freddie Mac Foundation are discussing possible funding of a new program that would work with schools to identify families in unstable financial situations. Intended to prevent homelessness, the program would allow INMED to assist families of children whose behavioral problems or poor performance at school stems from a fear of losing their homes.