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In affluent suburbs, 'a lot of have-nots'

By Ann Hardie
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Many well-off people live in Sandy Springs and Dunwoody. So do a growing number of families who are homeless and hungry.

No one knows that better than Tamara Carrera, executive director of Community Action Center, a nonprofit founded in 1987 by local churches and synagogues to provide emergency help to needy residents of those two communities.

Started in a scout hut of a local church, the nonprofit now has offices, including a food pantry and thrift store, off Roswell Road. Last year, it helped 2,600 families with financial assistance, housing, food, clothing or continuing education classes.

We talked to Carrera, a native of Ecuador who has an MBA in nonprofit management from Boston University, about what its like to be surrounded by so many struggling families in the land of plenty.

For more on the nonprofit's work, visit ourcac.org.

Q: How often do you hear, "Homelessness and hunger in Sandy Springs and Dunwoody — really?"

A: There are the haves, and there are a lot of have-nots. You have those very nice houses on Riverside Drive, but then you have a larger corridor of small houses and apartment complexes for people who can't afford to live in those 6,000-square-foot houses.

Q: Who are your clients?

A: Most of the families that we have served for a very, very long time are right at or below the poverty level. We have some families with incomes of \$10,000 a year. I don't know how they survive, especially considering the cost of housing in this area. They live here because they work here.

Q: Are most of your clients immigrants?

A: No. About 50 percent are African-American, 20 percent are white, 20 percent Hispanic, the rest is a mixture. In our English and citizenship classes, we have 14 nationalities that span the whole world.

Q: Can you talk about the recession's impact?

A: We saw it coming about a year before it got here. We first saw people who had temp jobs getting let go. Then people who do gardening, housekeeping and babysitting were being let go because the executives they worked for were losing their jobs. We are now seeing a bit of improvement.

Q: How so?

A: One measure is how many calls come in over the weekend. We ended the year with 600 calls waiting for us on Monday morning. We are back to 200 to 300.

Q: Has the recession changed the makeup of your clients?

A: A lot more middle-class families are coming. Even if they had three to six months of savings, that is gone if they have been out of work for a year. We have seen some very nice cars in the parking lot. You can't eat a car.

Q: Are you able to help everyone?

A: For 2009 and 2010, we were able to help maybe 40 percent of the families who needed it. We could give them food, we could give them clothing, but we could not help many with their immediate need, which was housing.

Q: What about your needs?

A: We need money. If you don't have money, you can't give it away.

Q: You started here as a volunteer. Doing what?

A: I was an intake volunteer so I interviewed clients. I learned a lot.

Q: What did you learn?

A: I learned to be humble. I came with my MBA thinking a lot of people ended up here because they were not budgeting right or not trying hard enough. But we have a lot of clients who are doing everything right. They just don't have enough resources.

The Sunday conversation is edited for length and clarity. Writer Ann Hardie can be reached by email at ann.hardie@ymail.com.

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