

Local Stories of Poverty & Hunger

The following three stories come to us from Catholic Charities' program coordinator for emergency services. These stories are true and recent accounts of families struggling to make ends meet in our own Capital District area.

All names have been changed.

Lee Ann

A friend of Lee Ann initially called Catholic Charities of Albany because he was worried about her. He had run into her at a local gas station after not seeing her for a long time. Despite her layered clothing, he noticed that she was extremely skinny. He spoke with her and she broke down, explaining how she hadn't been eating because she didn't have any money for food. She was down to 88 lbs. Our coordinator made contact with Lee Ann and it was obvious that she was in a crisis situation. Several years ago Lee Ann had been hit by a drunk driver on Rte. 9W and the accident had shattered many bones in her body. She spent months in the hospital and when she returned home her husband divorced her. Now she lives off \$700 per month in alimony and \$60 in food stamps. She has applied for SSI and SSD and was told she was ineligible. She has also applied for part-time jobs but feels that when they see her cane for walking, they immediately dismiss the idea of hiring her. Her rent is \$425, her utility bill is \$90, and her phone bill is \$70. She spends \$10 a month on laundry, over \$70 a month on co-pays for doctor visits and prescription medication, and \$50 a month for the gas or taxi rides to get to these visits. She usually runs out of her food stamps towards the middle of the month and must access her local food pantry. And remember: food stamps don't cover household necessities such as toilet paper or soap. Lee Ann began to cry when she spoke about how she had run out of these items as well and didn't feel she was practicing good hygiene.

Cynthia

Cynthia's family depends upon their food stamps each month. As a mother of 3 young children who collects no child support and lives off a small SSD check each month, the \$300+ in food stamps each month is how her family eats. Cynthia had just gotten her food stamps for the month several days prior to contacting Catholic Charities. Immediately after she got her stamps she rushed out to the supermarket and bought fruits and vegetables, both fresh and frozen, as well as meats and dairy products. Like many of the low-income mothers in the area, Cynthia knows she must buy these types of products with her food stamps because she is sometimes able to supplement her grocery shopping with a monthly trip to her local food pantry, where she is given mainly non-perishable items like pasta, rice, and canned goods. So after her trip to the supermarket Cynthia seemed to be set for the month. However Cynthia had gotten behind on her utility bill and she woke up one morning and her power was cut. Knowing the refrigerator was off and the food was going bad, she began to call National Grid and the Department of Social Services for assistance with getting her power turned back on. By the time Cynthia's power was restored, she had lost all of that month's meat, cheese, milk and other perishable items.

Rafael and Susan

Rafael and Susan first arrived to the Albany area 11 years ago and were homeless. They actually lived at a homeless shelter for a period of time. Over the past decade they worked hard, educated themselves, and continued adding to their family. Once a family of three, they are now blessed with four children, including a set of twin boys that just turned five. Susan is now makes \$1700 a month net pay working in a computer science firm and Rafael is an EKG technician. Several months ago they decided to switch jobs, schedules & therefore daycare providers. They had a woman lined up so Rafael took a new daytime job at a hospital. In his couple weeks of work he had to call in many times because their daycare provider was unable to work for them. As they tried to get this straightened out the two young boys started to show some behavioral problems and Rafael and Susan decided it might be best to cut some of their costs and for him to stay at home for a couple more months until the boys entered kindergarten. That was a fine idea except that, even after cutting corners like discontinuing cable, selling one car, and getting on a utility budget plan with National Grid, they just weren't making ends meet. They had just bought a home for the very first time and their mortgage was over \$1000 a month and their utility bill was \$200 a month. They spend \$400 on food a month, \$100 on insuring their vehicle and another \$200 on student loans. The other cost that only seemed to be increasing was gas. Between taking his wife to work, dropping his other children off to school, and running errands like grocery shopping or doctor visits, Rafael estimated that he was spending between \$200 and \$300 a month on gas. He got a part-time weekend job to supplement their income but he and Susan never saw each other. This family was an example of how the middle-class dream is sometimes unattainable due to the high cost of living and why some families find themselves falling further and further into debt.