

# Doubling Up in Down Times

## *Lack of Shelters, Overcrowded Shelters, and Lack of Affordable Housing Lead Families to Couch Surf*

by Carol Ward

Bradford County, Pa., a rural enclave in northeastern Pennsylvania, has a booming economy these days. The plan to drill and extract gas from the Marcellus Shale reserve has brought prosperity to many in that region of the state. In fact, a study commissioned by the Marcellus Shale Coalition found that the drilling could generate more than 156,000 jobs and \$12.8 billion in economic activity in all of Pennsylvania in just 2011 alone.

Communities usually welcome such a boon to their economies, but not all are reveling in the change of fortune. In fact, Dennis Phelps, executive director of Trehab, a community action agency covering six counties in the region, says the recent economic developments have put a nearly unbearable strain on the region's working poor.

"With all this gas well production there are a lot of workers who have come in, and they've basically overrun the market as far as available housing," says Phelps. "Rents have tripled from \$500 to \$1,500. The majority of people around here are making \$10–15 an hour and it's hard to pay the rent."

Many families have been forced out of their homes because they simply cannot afford to live there anymore. "We see it and we can do nothing," he says. "We have no tools in the tool chest to help these people. They're on their own. They're either doubling up with family members or maybe migrating out of here to where there are shelter systems, or in some cases they're staying in little travel trailers. But they're doubling up all over

the place, in places that are often older and substandard even for one family. It increases the risk for potential problems."

Northeastern Pennsylvania may be somewhat unique in its economic boom, but it is similar to other areas throughout the country in its rise in families who are "couch surfing" in order to survive. Many communities have not tackled the daunting task of counting the number of people living doubled up, but those that have are reporting significant increases since the economy collapsed between 2007 and 2008.

Anecdotally, towns, cities, and states around the country are reporting higher numbers of families living doubled up, often in precarious situations and in less-than-adequate circumstances, due to economic hardship. Some seek shelter with family and friends before ever considering a community shelter option. In other cases, shelters simply are not available. Rural families often have little or no access to shelters, while in some more urban communities, shelters are full and carry long waiting lists.

While service providers are well aware that these families exist, they struggle to track them. Service providers made several attempts to connect with doubled-up families for this report, but for myriad reasons the attempts failed. Doubled-up families generally do not have interaction with service providers in their areas: They are often wary of being "found out," and some do not consider themselves homeless or in need of assistance because they have a place to live.

## Numbers Are Elusive

The National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) released a report in January 2011 that put a spotlight on the doubling up problem nationwide. The report, "State of Homelessness in America," found that the doubled-up population increased by 12% to more than 6 million people nationwide from 2008 to 2009.

An earlier report from NAEH, "Economy Bytes: Doubled Up in the United States," provided additional insight into families specifically. "Approximately 2,135,000 people in just fewer than 800,000 families were doubled up in 2008. This represents an 8.5% increase in the number of people in families over 2005, and a 3.5% increase in the number of family units," the study said. While the report found that more singles than families doubled up, the numbers of families was rising. In 2005, families made up 42.7% of the doubled-up population, a figure that rose to 44.2% in 2008.

Anecdotally, the numbers have risen further in the past few years due to the deterioration in the economy in 2009 and a lack of broad-based recovery since then. But service providers say counting these precariously housed families is difficult at best.

Eva Barela, a McKinney-Vento grant coordinator covering 13 rural school districts of San Luis Valley in south-central Colorado, says she is attempting to identify those who are doubled

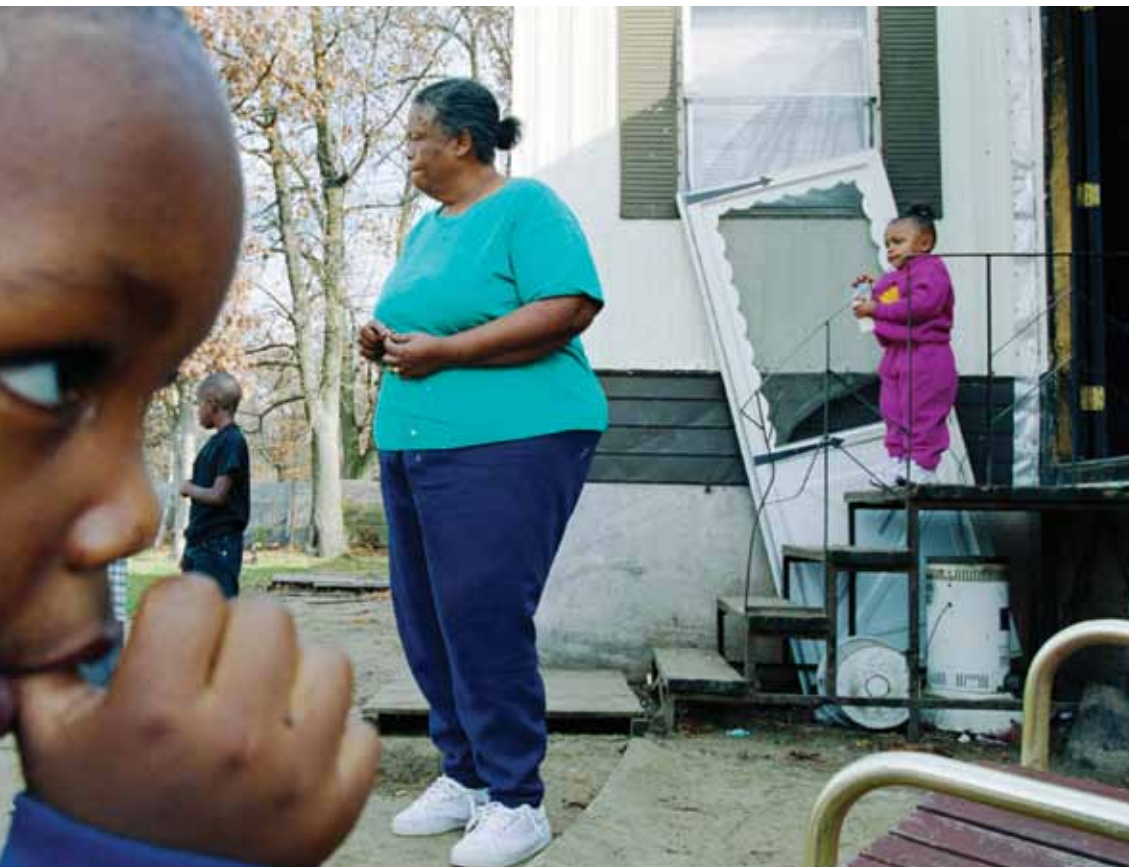
up by a housing survey done through the region's school districts. With one family shelter in the entire valley, which covers roughly 8,000 square miles, most families who are homeless are forced to find shelter on their own, most often with family or friends.

In many cases, Barela says, these families are not interested in being counted. Many are undocumented, she says, and even those that are legal residents are worried about having their children taken away. "The communities here are so small that everybody knows everybody's business, but they don't dare say anything," Barela says.

Shame is also a factor, says Gloria Edwards, executive director of Family Promise of Gallatin Valley, a network of interfaith organizations in Bozeman, Mont., that provides shelter and other services at a rotating roster of churches. "Most people are really embarrassed to admit that they're homeless, and as long as they're doubled up they don't view themselves that way," Edwards says. "There is still a real stigma attached." Those communities that have found a way to count the portion of the population that housing or living doubled-up have had some eye-opening results.

For example, in a point-in-time Montana Homeless Survey conducted earlier this year, more than 1,300 people in families in Montana slept at the home of a friend or family member on January 26 of this year, and nearly 800 of those people were staying on an emergency basis, simply because they had nowhere else to turn. It is the first time the statewide survey has broken out those who are "couch surfing" on an emergency basis.

"Considering that in 2011 we had about 800 people in families who were homeless, and



*The doubled-up population in America increased by 12% to more than 6 million people nationwide from 2008 to 2009. The owner of this two-bedroom trailer in rural Illinois has had up to 18 family members staying there at one time.*

now we have roughly that same number of persons who were doubled up, that's a problem," notes Robert Buzzas, coordinator of the Montana Continuum of Care Coalition.

Buzzas says that in past surveys, "staying with friends or family" has always been an option for people to select, but this year was the first time the survey distinguished between short-term emergency stays and voluntary, longer-term stays. Longer-term stays tend to involve families who collaborate to live together, often for financial reasons but not as an emergency solution, Buzzas says. Short-term emergency stays involve families that bunk with another to avoid the immediate threat of homelessness.

In Florida, a comprehensive count of homeless people in families conducted by the Homeless Coalition of Hillsborough County, which includes Tampa, showed similarly high numbers.

"We counted over 10,000 [people in families] who were living doubled-up with family and friends because of loss of housing or some kind of economic hardship," says Rayme Nuckles, CEO of the Homeless Coalition of Hillsborough County. Of those, 23% were children, Nuckles adds. The overall number of homeless in the county jumped from just under 10,000 to nearly 18,000, he says.

## Rural vs. Urban Challenges

Montana and Hillsborough County, Fla., represent two disparate data points in a growing problem. The Tampa area has several family shelters, but these days they are not adequate to meet the need. But in Montana and in many rural communities nationwide, families often do not have a shelter option at all.

In the San Luis Valley, for example, Barela says residents have to travel as far as 70 miles to the area's only shelter. In Montana, the state's large cities, like Helena and Missoula, do not have emergency family shelters, and the situation is even more dire in the state's often remote rural communities.

But there are a few options in some parts of Montana. Edwards says the majority of families served by Family Promise of Gallatin Valley have tried the doubled-up route but found it to be untenable.

"We're kind of like the last resort," Edwards says, noting the program is usually full although there is seldom a waiting list. "Our families sleep in churches and they have to abide by a lot of rules. Some of their privacy is invaded. Once they're in the program they realize what a great deal it is. ..."

In northeastern Pennsylvania, Trehab's Phelps says the one shelter does not come close to meeting the need. As with

Edwards' experience in Bozeman, Phelps says families come to Trehab often after exhausting their welcome with family and friends. "Generally what we do in our area is utilize motels," Phelps says, noting there is no momentum to expand services. "The whole concept of a homeless shelter is foreign around here because it's a conservative area and there are a lot of NIMBY ['Not in My Backyard'] issues."

In more urban areas of the country, shelters are more commonplace, but the weakened economy has resulted in increased demand for limited spaces. "We are pretty much full every day," says Stacy Cleveland, director of Hope Place, a family shelter run by the Seattle Union Gospel Mission. "A lot of time there are [men's] shelters that will squeeze single women in, sleep them on a mat on the floor, but most can't take children into a living situation like that."

The capacity situation forces Hope Place to turn some families away, but Cleveland is wary of the outcome. Noting that about two-thirds of families at Hope Place come from a doubled-up situation, she has heard enough to worry about sending them back. "Some of the women who come to us would have been better off on the streets than staying with the folks that put them up temporarily," Cleveland says, noting that a family's only non-shelter option might be a drug house or an abusive or unsafe situation.

In Boulder, Colorado, the Emergency Family Assistance Association provides food and shelter to families in need. Executive Director Terry Benjamin says in this time of limited resources, shelters have to screen families to assess the truly needy. "Our shelters are always full and we don't serve all homeless families. We can't—there are so damn many of them living doubled up," he says. "We want to help the people who are in the most unstable of those doubled-up situations, who are in crisis and they have used that resource to the max."

"If people come to us without exhausting those personal resources, we ask if there is someone they can stay with," Benjamin adds. "We don't hang people up by their thumbs and make them come up with that personal support, but in terms of prioritizing people that's one of the things we look at."

Providers in St. Paul, Minn., embark on a similar exercise most nights, according to Margaret Lovejoy, executive director of The Family Place, a day center that provides resources and shelter during the day but cannot accommodate overnight guests. She says her center routinely turns families away, and night shelters are equally taxed. For night placements, "The first question asked is, 'Can you stay where you are for another night and call us in the morning?'" Lovejoy says.

## Outreach Efforts

Many service providers are seeking to more clearly identify the numbers and characteristics of the doubled-up populations in their communities. Then they can work to address immediate needs like food and clothing, although this approach, too, faces obstacles.

“There are services available but the problem is that these families have to get established with case management somehow,” says Cleveland. “To apply for public assistance when you don’t have a statement from a landlord or proof of where you are living can be problematic.” She says that even food banks sometimes have restrictions based on ZIP code, eliminating those who cannot prove their place of residence.

Beyond the immediate need, many communities, such as Hillsborough County, are focusing on housing solutions. Nuckles says coming up with an exact number of those living doubled up this year was the first step. But with the county’s Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing funding ending this year, according to Nuckles, addressing the doubled-up problem will be a challenge.

Tampa has been selected by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as a priority homeless community, Nuckles says. The group wants to operate programs more efficiently, with a focus on rapidly rehousing individuals and families so they do not take so much time in the system, thus freeing up resources for others. Nuckles hopes that will help address the backlog of homeless people needing assistance.

Exacerbating the problem nationwide is the contracting availability of affordable housing. One study, “America’s Rental Housing: Meeting Challenges, Building on Opportunities,” conducted by the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University, outlined the problem. According to the study, “in combination, the shrinking affordable stock, falling incomes, and increased competition from higher-income renters have widened the gap between the number of very low-income renters

and the number of affordable, adequate, and available units.” The report went on to note that “in 2003, 16.3 million very low-income renters competed for 12 million affordable and adequate rentals that were not occupied by higher-income households. By 2009, the number of these renters hit 18 million, while the number of affordable, adequate, and available units dipped to 11.6 million, pushing the supply gap to 6.4 million.”

Benjamin sees that firsthand in Boulder, where he says working-class families routinely spend 50–70% of their income on housing. Lower wages due to reduced work hours have placed even the most modest accommodations out of reach, and low vacancy rates have pushed average rents higher in recent years.

Trehab in northeastern Pennsylvania is working to resolve a similar problem. The agency recently received approval for two low-income housing units (one a 40-unit facility for families, the other a 20-unit complex for the elderly) and is working on more, according to Phelps. But new housing options in the area are still at least two years away.

“We’ve got a great job situation here, with unemployment at about 6%, but most jobs aren’t paying enough,” says Phelps. “We’re trying to develop affordable housing but it takes so long. Meantime, where the hell do you live?” ■



*Although family homeless shelters are more prevalent in urban settings than they are in rural ones, the weak economy has resulted in more families applying for shelter. The tenant in this one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn recently took in her unemployed daughter and the daughter’s family, resulting in 13 people sharing this small home.*