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DAVID SWANSON / Staff Photographer

**Jobs at a Loss****Upheaval in the Region's Job Market:  
Suddenly shocked by life in a shelter**

By Alfred Lubrano, Inquirer Staff Writer

*One in an occasional series.*

Frank Marshall remembers the moment he transformed from unemployed security guard to homeless man.

"The walk toward my room at the shelter was surreal," he said. "I pinched myself to believe it was happening."

Shoehorning himself into a 14-by-10-foot room with three other bewildered men in the Salvation Army's Railton House in West Chester, Marshall, 48, lay on a narrow bed that looked like a boy's and stared at the ceiling.

On it, he projected images of the life he'd lost: job, apartment, girlfriend. Marshall, who always thought the homeless were drug addicts or schizophrenics, was dumbfounded.

"There are days when my faith is lacking," said Marshall, a Roman Catholic from Phoenixville who is unmarried with no children. "This is unbelievable."

Though the economy is improving, hard times grind on, and many people who lost jobs near the beginning of the downturn are facing the ultimate consequence of unemployment: homelessness.

Tomorrow, the maximum of 79 weeks of unemployment benefits and extensions will end for 20,000 in Pennsylvania and 45,000 in New Jersey, officials said. An additional 14,000 Pennsylvanians will exhaust all benefits by next Saturday.

What happens then for these people is difficult to track. But when the job is gone, unemployment benefits have dried up, savings are drained, and relatives are unable to help, the homeless shelter may be all that's left.

The first casualties, experts say, are those who lost low-paying jobs: clerks and house cleaners, food-service workers and security guards.

Among them, those with the hardest road are single women with children, the poorest working Americans.

"High unemployment and foreclosure are catapulting female-headed households into the streets," said Ellen Bassuk, president of the nonprofit National Center on Family Homelessness in Boston.

An increasing number of people in the Philadelphia region are being forced to live in shelters because of the sour economy, an informal survey of 106 shelters and homeless agencies suggests. Officials could not give precise numbers of how many are homeless, however.

Others say they are getting more calls from people who are unemployed and facing foreclosure.

"These people aren't homeless yet, but they might soon be and are testing the waters," said Laura Wall Starke, executive director of the Inter-Faith Housing Alliance in Ambler. "This wasn't anything we'd seen prior to last September."

What's out there now, said Bonnie Jordan, program director of Catholic Charities Emergency and Community Services in Delanco, is "a new population of homeless who have experienced recent job loss and have exhausted unemployment benefits. They have nowhere to turn."

In the past, informal family safety nets could help a jobless relative until fortunes improved. But the rough economy is victimizing many people, making so-called couch surfing with kin less possible.

"Brothers, sisters, nieces are being evicted," said Gail Jones, case manager with the Delanco Catholic Charities office. "I know a mother who evicted her own unemployed daughter from her apartment. She needed a boarder to pay the rent."

### **Searching for work**

New to homelessness when he arrived at the shelter in June, Marshall spent his first days walking the streets of West Chester in the summer sun. Passing diners lunching al fresco on tony Gay Street, he tried to avoid eye contact for fear of seeing someone he knew.

Because the shelter closes at 7 a.m. and reopens at 6 p.m., Marshall had 11 hours to fill. They took their toll: He collapsed from heat exhaustion.

A corporate security guard for three companies over 23 years - several of them with high-level security clearance - Marshall was told he was being laid off from his \$12-an-hour job in July 2008 because of the economy. He took a landscaping job at \$15 an hour, but lost that after several weeks because homeowners could no longer afford his company's services.

When his money ran out and he couldn't pay the rent, Marshall had to give up his apartment.

An aunt took him in, but her son was dying of cancer, and Marshall couldn't stay. After that, it was sleep in the street or at the shelter.

"I had a normal job and a normal life," said Marshall, whom shelter officials described as a quiet, dignified man.

But now he eats when he's told, sleeps when he's told, and must follow the rules of the house, which the 20 men there keep immaculate and smelling of industrial cleanser. At night, the Railton residents watch TV or play board games - homeless men sitting in a shelter, winning and losing the game of Life.

After lights out, Marshall lies in bed and talks quietly with a roommate who lost his electrical-engineering job. They speak in the past tense: who they once were, what they once did.

Stays at the shelter vary, and no one's there long. Marshall's time there will end in 12 days; he needs a job to qualify for transitional housing. Shelter officials say the number of men requesting beds has increased 12 percent since the economy tanked.

Marshall is on the public library's computers every day, looking for work. Security jobs are scarce, and many require workers to have cars; Marshall lost his to the bank.

He's applied for table-waiting jobs in West Chester restaurants. "But they like young girls and guys for those," Marshall said. "And the townspeople eye you up and down."

With winter coming, he said, "my biggest worry is what to do on the street when it gets cold. Maybe my aunt will take me back. I just don't know."

### **Six in one room**

Living nine months in a single room with her five children on the grounds of the former Pennsylvania Hospital for the Insane, Marinet Roman says she is going crazy.

"I will be traumatized for the rest of my life," said Roman, 37, a native of Puerto Rico who was raised in Brooklyn, N.Y. "I never knew what a shelter was."

She does now. Travelers Aid Family Service of Philadelphia's Family Residence is a 75-room emergency shelter for homeless families in West Philadelphia.

With long halls awash in harsh fluorescent light, the shelter looks like a run-down college dormitory. Roman keeps her 19-by-18-foot room mostly dark even during the day to beat back the migraines that invaded her head since she lost her security-guard and housecleaning jobs late last year.

The room is neat but crowded with beds. The bathrooms are in the hall. At night, Roman wants only to sleep, while her son Luis, 14, watches TV and her daughter, Tianna, 15, plays the radio. Meanwhile, Roger, 3, and Jerry, 2, constantly try to flee the room to find space to play. Eric, 11, takes it all in sadly.

"Their grades went down, their behavior changed since we got here," said Roman, dark-haired, thin, and well-groomed.

Two years ago, the family was living with Roman's boyfriend, the father of two of her children. The couple was renting an \$850-a-month house in the Northeast. Working 53 hours a week, Roman made \$25,000 a year, which the boyfriend augmented significantly.

Then he left for Costa Rica and never came back. "I think he's abandoned us," Roman said. Soon after, the economy collapsed, and Roman eventually lost her jobs, exhausted unemployment, and wound up in the shelter.

Social-service workers who know Roman say she's a good mother and a hard worker. They add that, like many women now in shelters, she might have been able to make do on the outside if her partner had stayed.

"I was never poor," Roman said. "I always had enough for me and the kids. My kids were always clean. Now my daughter is so angry, and my son is fighting me because he wants more space."

What Roman said she misses most is a kitchen and being able to fill it with the smell of her yellow rice and beans. If she could just cook her own food now and feed it to her children, Roman said, she would feel she had regained some control over her life.

"You should see how people talk down to us because we're homeless," she said. "I will never in my life forget this horrible nightmare."

### **Checkout time**

It was Tysheema Burrell's last hour at a motel used to house homeless families on Route 130 in Cinnaminson.

She frantically filled plastic shopping bags with what few belongings she had left: a blanket, some canned ravioli, five diapers.

Her mother, Rose, was on hand, fretting.

Catholic Charities Emergency and Community Services had placed Burrell there for more than a week, but it was checkout time. Where Burrell, 23, would go next with her two children, ages 1 and 4, she had no idea.

"We sometimes sleep on my mom's cement garage floor on blankets," said Burrell, a laid-off food-services worker who used to rent a \$740-a-month apartment in Beverly. She made \$27,000 a year, and her fiance contributed more from his two jobs. But then he got arrested on gun charges and won't be around to help out until 2013.

"If it doesn't rain, I could sleep in the tent in my aunt's yard," Burrell continued to calculate. "But my uncle doesn't want my drama."

Looking around the worn room, she exclaimed: "God, it was horrible here! Roaches, no lights in the bathroom. My daughter is used to having her own room."

Packing and breathing hard, Burrell stopped and teared up. "Do you know I threw out almost all my baby's dolls?" she said. "I can't carry everything without luggage, without storage."

Then she tried to describe what it felt like to put Barbies in the trash, but she got too emotional. She added, "Do you know I threw out my tables, my couches, all that I had worked so hard for? The beds, too."

Embarrassed and hurting, her mother repeated that there's no room at her house. She and her husband are caring for her mother and another daughter with children.

That brought up a sore point.

"My dad doesn't want me in the house because he feels I shouldn't have had babies out of wedlock," Burrell said. "My fiance and I were going to get married. I've known him since we were 8."

"Your father gets upset," her mother said.

"I didn't ask to lose my job," Burrell shot back. "He doesn't care."

"He cares," her mother said. "He just can't take it. A lot of people are going through a lot."

Burrell said nothing, then peered out the window. "Sunny," she said. "Guess I can sleep in the tent tonight."

### **'Like a hurricane'**

It's clean and spacious in the Germantown apartment where Stephanie Smith now lives, so much better than the shelter.

She and her two children, ages 4 and 7, moved recently to the unit owned by Dignity Housing, a transitional facility. Most important to Smith, there is a private bathroom and a front door she can shut and lock.

"The shelter was awful," said Smith, 25, who was laid off from a clerk's job with the federal government and a cooking job in a restaurant. "The kids were crying, wetting the bed. My daughter asked, 'Mommy, can I sell my toys to help us?'"

Before she was unemployed, Smith made \$24,000 a year and lived in a four-bedroom house in West Philadelphia. She wasn't paying rent, but was shelling out \$1,000 a month to pay her grandmother's back property taxes.

After Smith lost her jobs, the house was foreclosed on, and she and her children went into the Woodstock Family Center shelter in North Philadelphia for six months.

"Becoming homeless was like a hurricane," Smith said. "Like losing air to breathe."

Having worked since she was 16, Smith is reinventing herself, going to school to be a pharmacy technician.

At the apartment, she still must check in with agency managers and has to announce all visitors. But it's a step toward independence.

All she needs is a job. These days, however, that's a lot to hope for.

"Even if you find one," she said, "there's no such thing as job security. "Not at all."