

Homeless in Hagerstown

Part three of a six-part series



By Ric Dugan/Staff Photographer

A mother holds the hand of her son last spring after he talks about missing his friends. The mother, father and three children were evicted from their rented duplex last spring and have been living in an apartment provided by the Washington County Community Action Council since then. Now, things are looking up for the family.

Family fights to keep it together

By ERIN JULIUS
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She worked for the Department of Social Services but was laid off in April 2008 when her position was eliminated. The mother of three had been looking for work ever since, driving as far as Montgomery County and Washington, D.C., for job interviews.

Her husband had been working full time at a store, but after Christmas his hours were cut to about 20 a week.

In April the family was evicted from a rented duplex, and in May they moved to an apartment provided by the Community Action Council, where they remained in September.

A week into their stay at the shelter in May, family members agreed to share their story. The mother and father undated The Herald-Mail about

their situation last week.

In May, the mother, father and three children — ages 11, 12, and 14 — sat in the sparsely furnished living room of their temporary home. The Herald-Mail is not using their names to protect the privacy of the children, who attend Washington County Public Schools.

This was the first time the family had been without a home.

"We always had a place of our own we took care of," the mother said.

She was laid off from her job at Social Services shortly after the family moved into the duplex. Rent was \$850 a month but it was the electric bills that played a large role in doing them in, the parents said.

When they rented the home in March 2008, they asked what the electric would cost during the winter heating season, and were told it wouldn't

INSIDE:

- How you can help, A2

WEDNESDAY IN THE HERALD-MAIL

- Staff members at the Washington County Free Library usually can tell which of the people sitting in the downtown branch are there to get out of the cold or the rain or the heat.

be more than \$150 a month.

But when cold weather arrived, they watched the electric bill creep up to \$280 a month, then \$340.

See FAMILY, A2

Coming Wednesday

Commissioner's meeting

Find out what the Washington County Commissioners did at their weekly meeting.

Corrections

The Herald-Mail strives to be accurate and fair in all of our stories. Sometimes, we make mistakes. If you believe we have made an error, please call Executive Editor Jake Womer at 301-733-5131, ext. 7594. Errors made in page one stories will be corrected on page one. All other corrections will run in this spot.

Lotteries (drawn Monday)

MARYLAND

Midday Pick 3 530
Midday Pick 4 4705
Evening Pick 3 722
Evening Pick 4 3153
Bonus Match 5 3, 6, 12, 13, 35
Bonus Ball 14

PENNSYLVANIA

Midday Daily 617
Midday Big 4 5785
Midday Quinto 6, 3, 7, 4, 4
Evening Daily 115
Evening Big 4 4048
Evening Quinto 4, 5, 4, 7, 5
Treasure Hunt 2, 15, 21, 27, 28
Cash 5 8, 14, 19, 27, 36
Mix & Match 11, 3, 16, 17, 19

WEST VIRGINIA

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Daily 4 5035
Cash 25 9, 10, 13, 18, 20, 22

VIRGINIA

Midday Pick 3 223
Midday Pick 4 1079
Midday Cash 5 2, 6, 28, 31, 32
Evening Pick 3 236
Evening Pick 4 3109
Evening Cash 5 7, 10, 11, 19, 29

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Midday Lucky 825
Midday DC 4 5450
Midday DC 5 7, 3, 4, 5, 7
Evening Lucky 472
Evening DC 4 5159
Evening DC 5 4, 4, 8, 1, 5
Daily Six 2, 4, 8, 21, 27, 32
Bonus Ball 36

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FAMILY

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"Electric took us under more than anything else," the father said.

Then, after Christmas, the father's employer cut his hours, and for more than a month he was working about 20 hours a week.

Within a few months, he was back to full-time work, about 38 hours a week, but it was too late for the family to avoid eviction.

On the day they were interviewed in May, the family was mostly upbeat, although the youngest boy sobbed as he talked about missing friends from his old neighborhood. His mother held his hand while he answered a few questions.

By September, her son was good friends with children who live next door, the mother said.

The father said: "Keep it together, keep it together, keep it together," a motto the family has taken from Eddie Murphy's film "Bowfinger."

With no cable television, they were renting DVDs for free from the Washington County Free Library. Comedies were their favorite.

"Put in some comedy, stay happy," the father said.

His attitude is important, he said, because, "If the captain of the ship crumbles, everyone crumbles."

From his perspective, his family is better off than many others.

"I'm an American. We are spoiled beyond belief," said the father, who served in the U.S. Air Force in the 1980s. "We're not really poor. We're not walking two miles" to get a drink of water.

His wife agreed.

The father made it clear he was sharing his family's story only because of the shooting deaths in April of a family in Middletown, Md.

Police said a 34-year-old man, an account manager for railroad operator CSX Corp., shot his children and 33-year-old wife with a small-caliber handgun as they slept on the night of April 16 and then killed himself with a shotgun the next day.

This father said he could empathize with that father and the pressure he might have been feeling, but said he could never imagine taking such a drastic step.

"My stress level is very high right now, but it would never, ever get to that point," he said four months ago.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Those who would like to help the homeless by volunteering their time or donating money or materials, or those who need assistance, may contact one of the following organizations.

■ **CASA (Citizens Assisting and Sheltering the Abused)**, 116 W. Baltimore St., Hagerstown, 301-739-4990; 24-hour hot line at 301-739-8975; www.casainc.org; e-mail to casa5@myactv.net — Provides counseling, crisis intervention, and shelter to individuals and families involved in domestic violence situations, among other programs.

■ **Hope Center at Hagerstown Rescue Mission**, 125 N. Prospect St., Hagerstown; 301-739-1165 — Offers transitional housing and emergency shelter for men; meals and food, clothing and counseling, which includes a 13-month program for life recovery.

■ **Interfaith Service Coalition**, 116 W. High St., Hancock; 301-678-6605; www.hancockmaryland.com/InterfaithServiceCoalition.htm — Works to assist those in need with food, nutrition education, literacy training, shelter and clothing. Serves people within a 15-mile radius of Hancock.

■ **Lifehouse West** — Call Carl Booker at 240-291-2648 or contact the church through its Web site at www.lhwest.org.

■ **Washington County Community Action Council**, 101 Summit Ave., Hagerstown; 301-797-4161; www.wccac.org — Helps low-income residents of Washington County become self sufficient.

■ **REACH Caregivers**, 140 W. Franklin St., Suite 300, Hagerstown; 301-733-2371; www.reachcaregivers.org — Faith-based, nonprofit organization that works to fill unmet needs with volunteers and community donations. Provides emergency motel placements, food, utility assistance and a church-based cold weather shelter.

■ **St. John's Shelter**, 14-16 Randolph Ave., Hagerstown; 301-791-9411 — Offers emergency shelter for families, cooking facilities, counseling and more.

■ **The Salvation Army**, 534 W. Franklin St., Hagerstown; 301-733-2440 — Provides emergency and transitional shelter, meals and counseling.

■ **Washington County Mental Health Authority Inc.**, 339 E. Antietam St., Suite 5, Hagerstown; 301-739-2490; www.wcmha.org — Works to improve the quality of life for those with mental illness.

■ **Washington County Department of Social Services**, 122 N. Potomac St., Hagerstown; 240-420-2100; www.dhr.state.md.us/washington.htm — Assists people in economic need.

What's the hardest part of becoming homeless?

"Not having a home to call your own ... having to pack your family up," the mother said.

As the family was moving out of their rented home, people went through their belongings that had been left at the curb.

"People see a dresser in a yard and think it's a yard sale," the man said.

That first night without a place, the family stayed with friends. Community Action Council had an opening the next day.

Improved circumstances

Without the shelter provided by the Community Action Council, the family knows they might not have been able to find a place where they all could stay together.

That CAC had an opening so soon was nothing less than an answer to prayers, they said.

To remain in the CAC apartment required them to take certain steps.

They had to submit receipts to show how they were spending money, and the mother

had to keep a log of all of her job contacts to show she was serious about looking for a job.

And she had been, for more than a year, she said in May.

"Job Services knows me by name," the woman said then.

She said she stopped in almost daily at the office on Franklin Street, and had submitted more than 100 applications.

"Everyone is vying for the same position," she said. She has experience, but no degree. "If you have a BA, an AA, that puts you to the forefront," she said.

Both she and her husband finished high school, and he has an associate degree.

"The reality of it is, there are no jobs. My wife has to go to D.C. to find meaningful employment that pays well," the dad said.

By September, she had found an \$8-an-hour job in housekeeping at a hotel. Her husband's hours at the store had been increased to 50 or 60 a week in preparation for the Christmas season, she said.

The family is on a waiting list for public housing, but they're also saving to buy

a home. A bridge program through CAC will match up to \$2,000 because they will be first-time home buyers, the mother said.

They've been told that a spot in public housing might come available as soon as 30 days, the mother said Friday.

"Through a lot of prayer and readjustment of your attitude, you have to dig deep and find the hope for yourself to give to your family," she said.

The children

The 12-year-old daughter echoed her father in May when asked how she was dealing with the changes in her life.

"Trying to keep it together," she said. "I pray."

All three children are honor students.

"All my kids are very smart," the father said. "I just want them to flourish."

The 14-year-old boy, a high school student, was displeased that his books were put in storage when the family moved out of their home.

"I like to read a lot," said the boy, who wants to be a doctor one day.

All three children started school in August, enrolled at the same schools they attended before their lives were disrupted by the eviction.

The father in May offered this advice for getting through the tough times: "Keep your head up, roll with the punches. Go to school, have a normal day. Come home and eat."

Homeless in Hagerstown

The Homeless in Hagerstown series continues through Friday.

Coming Wednesday

• Washington County Free Library staff members can usually tell which of the people sitting in the downtown branch are there to get out of the cold or the rain or the heat.

Coming Thursday

• After Dale Hunter was evicted he drove from northern Virginia to the VA Medical Center in Martinsburg, W.Va., and checked in to the homeless program there. For Hunter and others on the street, help is available.

Coming Friday

• There are a number of places the homeless can go to get a meal or find shelter.