Government drops 126 counties from homeless aid program

Lower levels of poverty, unemployment cause cuts

By Jeff Barker
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The federal government is dropping 126 counties from a $124.9 million homeless aid program, as advocacy groups charge there is a continuing increase in the number of Americans without adequate shelter.

"You don't suddenly become a non-needy area," said Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Pa. "There ought to be a way to come down slowly."

The National Alliance To End Homelessness, a private research and assistance group, estimates as many as 2 million people are homeless for at least a portion of the year, and the number seems to be growing.

"To learn at this time, just as winter weather is beginning to grip our area, that we will not have the resources to meet the needs presented to us by these very vulnerable individuals and families is disappointing, to say the least," Theresa Zogby, supervisor of Catholic Social Services of Hazleton, Pa., said in a letter last month to Kanjorski.

Congress didn't cut funds from the program for the current year, but the 126 counties lost their eligibility when they fell below the 1990 criteria for local poverty, unemployment or the size of the overall labor force.

Federal officials have described the homeless aid program as "a model of public-private cooperation."

Wiley B. Cooper, program staff director, said an unusually high number of counties received aid in 1989.

"Last year, we did have a jump-up because of the some of the mid-America and oil-belt problems," Cooper said in a recent interview, adding that some of those problems have stabilized.

Among the areas dropped were Tulsa County, Okla., which received $368,000 last year from the Emergency Food and Shelter National Board program, and Luzerne County, Pa., which received $230,000.

Cooper said the real problems were the difficulty in measuring homelessness and a shortage of money.

"It's tough when you get money one year and not the next, and we understand that," he said.

This year, 882 counties automatically qualified for aid compared with 980 in 1989, said program aide Sharon Bailey. While dropping 126 counties, the government added 28 that had not qualified in 1989, she said.

Cooper said in an interview that the program was designed "to supplement and extend" efforts on behalf of the homeless, and the government cannot guarantee funding to individual counties beyond one year.

Luzerne County qualified for nothing in 1990, based on what Kanjorski considers a "quirk" in the formula. Unemployment and poverty rates are used as criteria because homelessness and hunger are difficult to quantify.

Despite a poverty rate above the 11 percent in the guidelines, Luzerne was declared ineligible because Wilkes-Barre's labor force did not exceed 25,000.

The labor force rule was never published in the regulations, although Cooper confirmed it is a criteria. He said the rule would be reversed if the national board determines at its Jan. 19 meeting that it is unfairly preventing needy counties from obtaining funding.

Ohio had the most dropped counties with 15. There were 13 in Illinois, 11 in Texas and nine in North Carolina.

Tulsa in Oklahoma was the biggest county on the drop list.

"While on the face of it, this (denial) would seem to be a positive reflection of an improving local economy. Nothing could be further from the truth," the Tulsa Area United Way said in a Nov. 30 letter to program administrators.

The Tulsa area has struggled with new oil company layoffs, said Jim Cieslar of the United Way. He said last year's money provided more than 340,000 meals and paid for 38,000 nights of shelter and 1,600 utility bills.

He said program administrators told him the county needed average monthly unemployment of 18,000 to qualify for automatic assistance. The federal program's figures showed joblessness of 16,575, but Cieslar said "our figures were 17,600." Either way, Tulsa lost its funding.

Tulsa and Luzerne counties may still get aid from so-called set-aside funds, although not as much as last year. Those funds are administered by state boards trying to cushion the blow for communities whose eligibility has expired. When the set-aside totals are added in, Cooper said the program may fund as many as 2,300 counties this year.

The food and shelter program is governed by a national board composed of representatives of the United Way of America, Catholic Charities USA, the American Red Cross and other charitable organizations. Branches of those same groups distribute the money locally.

The program generated praise from communities for bypassing state bureaucracies and providing money directly to agencies that serve the homeless. Criticism centered on the formula, which some counties said was rigid and arbitrary and made it impossible to plan from one year to the next.

Cooper defended the program and its formula.

"The flip side of predictability is being unable to respond to change," Cooper said. "Communities change in what's happening. Last year, Texas was incredibly hard hit, and this year it is beginning to recover. That happens all over the country because the money is designated for the most critical need areas."