

Recession in Utah trickles up

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A week before Thanksgiving, Reyna Moreno's life was "pretty good, for an 18-year-old."

She had an apartment, a TV, a car. Her 9-month-old son Alexander had his own room with a crib. She was going to college.

"I was doing good. I was proud of myself," she says. "Then right when I hit it, I hit rock bottom."

A week before Thanksgiving, a cascade of individually survivable challenges melded into one life-changing crisis: Her boyfriend Brian Henriquez lost his job, Alexander got sick (with no health insurance), the babysitter got married and went on a honeymoon and Moreno's car broke down.

Two weeks later, the little family is living in The Road Home's winter shelter in Midvale, storing Pepsodent and pineapple chunks and diapers in plastic bins. They left the furniture, pawned the electronics, parked the car. She dropped out of school.

"I think we'll be here for Christmas," says Moreno. "I'd rather have it happen now, when my baby can't remember."

If there was any doubt before, the past week holds an answer: Recession has come to Utah. With a vengeance.

KraftMaid announced it would close its West Jordan plant after just three years of operation. Office Depot may close stores in Utah. Kennecott workers face possible layoffs as Rio Tinto eliminates 14,000 job worldwide. Two Ballys gyms have been shuttered. The legislature plans to cut 15 percent out of the state budget. And the governor's inauguration will be a simple

ceremony on the Capitol steps.

But while middle-class cabinetmakers try to stretch their severance checks past February and the Department of Commerce suggests Ballys members file complaints if they don't get a refund, working-class and marginally employed Utahns don't have the luxury. They're already looking for work, facing eviction and living in shelters.

From July to September, The Road Home recorded a 118 percent increase in demand for shelter space. Crossroads Urban Center handed out 3,558 free turkeys for Thanksgiving dinners -- nearly 400 more than last year. And Catholic Community Services dispensed \$18,000 in emergency rental assistance to 26 households in two weeks; the money was supposed to last the month. They've added more high chairs at the St.

Vincent De Paul soup kitchen.

"We're hearing it hasn't hit Utah yet. Well, it's hit," says Kathryn Brussard, CCS director of development and marketing. "We've never seen anything like it."

The malaise seems to trickle up, first hitting those who can least afford the cost of a turkey or a visit to Instacare.

At Alliance House, a "clubhouse" and support center for mentally ill Utahns, the campaign to transition members into work is constricting. Two companies that sponsored transitional employment for Alliance House members have cut the part-time positions. And as the glut of unemployed Utahns grows, a history of mental illness becomes an easy disqualifier, putting permanent employment further out of reach.

"It's harder for members to get interviews and to find a job," says Amber Mackay, employment coordinator. "The jobs just aren't there."

Tineke VanDijk, who ran her own law practice for 17 years before being hospitalized with obsessive compulsive and bipolar disorders, was one of 80 applicants for a receptionist job that paid \$10.50 an hour.

"That's what I'm up against," VanDijk says. "You don't just walk up and say, 'Hi, I have a mental illness. Can I have this job?'"

But things are looking up ever so slightly for Moreno and Henriquez. He just found another temporary job stacking boxes. The young parents hope it lasts long enough to buy special formula for Alexander and fix the car.

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