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DAVID LAZARUS:

Social services see recession's toll

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Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times

Rachael Brecher, a Los Angeles retail manager who lost her job, said she has been looking for work for three months. Others who are worse off are turning to food pantries and crisis hotlines, which report a surge in demand.

David Lazarus
January 10, 2009

Inglewood resident Michael Brown has a master's degree in counseling and has spent 20 years working as a mental health professional. He lost his job at Kedren Community Health Center last March because of a cutback in state funds.

On Friday, Brown, 43, made his first visit to a food pantry. He and his 9-year-old daughter had nowhere else to turn.

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"The unemployment checks aren't enough to cover the rent, the food, the car insurance," Brown said while awaiting a bag of free groceries at St. Margaret's Center off Hawthorne Boulevard. "The money runs out every month."

Government officials reported Friday that 2.6 million jobs were lost in 2008. The nation's unemployment rate is at a 16-year high of 7.2%. California's is 8.4%.

But such statistics hardly do justice to what millions of people are now going through, many for the first time in their lives.

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"It's humbling," Brown said. "I'm doing whatever I can. I pick up cans and sell DVDs on the street corner."

He acknowledged that after a long career providing help to

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jobless?

Very. I'm already out of work.

Quite a bit. No job seems secure these days.

Not so much. The economy will soon improve.

troubled people -- many living on the streets -- he's now not far from their position.

"I'm a spiritual person," Brown said after a moment's reflection. "I can only wonder why God has led me here."

Maybe God. Or maybe just a lousy economy that's been hammered by housing and financial markets that for too long have gone without sufficient oversight.

Whatever the reason, few are immune from the worst downturn in decades.

"This is hitting high-level professionals as well as less-skilled workers," said Claudia Finkel, chief operating officer of Jewish Vocational Service in Los Angeles. "There isn't a person that I talk to who doesn't know someone looking for work."

Lancaster resident Alisha Wright, 23, was laid off nearly a year ago from her job as an assistant manager at a Denny's restaurant.

"I have applied for maybe 70 or 80 jobs," she said. "Either I don't meet the criteria or they're just not hiring."

Wright said she was getting by on assistance from the county. She said she no longer shops for clothes, no longer goes to movies. She canceled her cable TV service months ago.

The hardest part of being jobless, Wright said, is shielding her 5-year-old son from what she's experiencing.

"I try to keep everything as normal as possible," she said. "But sometimes he asks me who took my job away from me. He tells me I have to go get my job back."

"I get sad sometimes. I really want to get back on the ball."

The rising number of people losing their jobs and homes has caused a surge in calls to suicide hotlines. The Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center, which operates L.A.'s busiest crisis-prevention line, says calls are up as much as 60% from a year ago.

The recession is also placing an unprecedented strain on food pantries as more people struggle to make ends meet.

The L.A. Regional Food Bank, which distributes groceries via a network of hundreds of religious entities and nonprofit groups, says demand at food pantries is up by about 40% from a year ago.

"Food pantries are seeing people who never had to seek assistance before," said Michael Flood, president of the regional food bank. "With the latest unemployment numbers, we're bracing for continued elevated levels."

L.A. resident Rachael Brecher, 32, was laid off from her job as manager of a furniture store in September. After three months of hunting for work on the Craigslist website, through word of mouth and by knocking on doors, she said she's still nowhere close to finding a new job.

"Companies are either not hiring or they're hiring only part-time staff, or they're hiring people at much, much lower rates than I'm accustomed to," Brecher said.

And it's not like she's making outrageous salary demands. In her previous job, Brecher said, she made about \$65,000 a year in pay and commissions.

"I'm willing to take a \$20,000 cut in pay," she said. "But I still can't find a job."

President-elect Barack Obama cited the dismal unemployment stats in pushing Friday for a massive stimulus package. "Clearly the situation is dire," he said. "It is deteriorating, and it demands urgent and immediate action."

It also demands that we tough it out, one way or another. As Brown received his groceries from the St. Margaret's food pantry, I asked if he was having trouble being strong.

"I'm here with my head up," he replied. "I see light at the end of the tunnel. There's always light."

David Lazarus' column runs Wednesdays and Sundays and occasionally in between.

Send your tips or feedback to david.lazarus@latimes.com.