**Housing crisis buckles Lower Cape**

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by Ethan Genter

Larry Marsland, CEO of the Lower Cape Outreach Council, says there has been a sharp spike this year in the need for client services. “It is the age-old problem of affordable housing.” He stands in the council’s food pantry.

ORLEANS — The Lower Cape Outreach Council has seen a more than 20 percent increase in emergency assistance spending in the first five months of this year over 2017, leaving officials to wonder whether they will be able to keep up with the demand for help with housing and food.

The council has provided more than $90,000 more in assistance over last year, largely dedicated to helping Lower Cape residents with shelter and provisions, council CEO Larry Marsland said.

From January to May, it has helped 76 more households than in 2017. The problem seems to be spread across the Lower Cape, Marsland said, although Harwich has seen the largest spike, followed by Orleans and Brewster.

Last year, the council spent $431,971 from January through May. This year it has spent more than $522,464.

“It’s the age-old problem of no affordable housing,” Marsland said. “It’s a huge crisis.”

The council helps Lower Cape residents pay for essential needs, including shelter, utilities and food.

The Lower Cape’s affordable housing is among the worst in the county. According to a 2014 Cape Cod Commission study, about half the homes on the Lower Cape are second homes, and its towns have among the lowest rates of subsidized housing inventory on the Cape.

The Cape Community Development Partnership, a nonprofit agency that manages 72 affordable rental units on the Lower Cape, has also seen a significant increase in the number of people on its waiting lists.

“In the past, we have seen 15 to 20 families on the waiting lists for each of our units,” partnership CEO Jay Coburn said. “In the past year, the number of families on our waiting lists has grown to 30 to 40 per unit.”

The reason emergency assistance is higher this year compared with last year isn’t quite clear, Marsland said.

“It’s kind of remarkable,” he said. ”(I’m) not sure why things have become so grave this year.”

Coburn said one possible reason for the increase might be that more families are cost-burdened, meaning they spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing. Families in that situation don’t have a lot to spend on unanticipated expenses such as car repairs or medical emergencies.

“In addition, many two-earner households make too much money to meet the income restrictions for affordable housing, yet they don’t earn enough to close the affordability gap given that the cost of housing on the Lower Cape is driven by second-home owners with much larger incomes derived from off-Cape jobs,” Coburn wrote. Plus, the cost of gas is “putting the squeeze on working families, particularly those having to drive from the mid-Cape, where more moderately priced housing is available, to the Outer Cape for work.”

Housing Assistance Corporation has spent more money this year, but that doesn’t necessarily reflect that there is more need than before, just that they have more money this year to spend, said Laura Reckford, director of community relations for the nonprofit agency.

Anecdotally, the front desk has seen a rise in numbers, Reckford said.

“We see lots of landlords are selling their homes, which forces people out and diminishes the rental market,” she said. They have also seen an uptick in homeowners seeking help to bankroll repairs and people moving from apartments into rooming houses.

The Lower Cape Outreach Council newsletter notes that there is no moderately priced housing available, making Cape Cod more and more “the land of second-home owners,” with rentals growing more scarce.

To keep up with the increased demand, the council has opened its food pantry in Harwich one more day a week.

Marsland said the council has not seen increases like this since the recession in 2008. He said he hopes that people will open their wallets and help them reach their goal of raising $1,100,000 this year.

“I know sometimes it seems that I’m always knocking at your door to help me help local people who are depending on us,” Marsland wrote. But the spike “in client services is a huge number and a difficult amount of money to raise beyond budget expectations.”