

Metro

Sunday conversation with John Moeller

A helping hand to those in crisis

Even the affluent are touched by poverty.

'They are unaccustomed to needing our help' at MUST Ministries.

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A recent report shows metro Atlanta's poverty rate is growing at a greater speed than most other regions around the country. And the number of poor people has grown exponentially faster in the suburbs than in the city; more than a half-million suburban Atlantans now live below the poverty line.

Marietta's MUST Ministries (Ministries United in Service and Training; www.mustministries.org) is one of the organizations helping families avoid foreclosure and other pitfalls.

We spoke to executive director John Moeller about the trend he's seeing:

Q: Is poverty getting worse, especially in the north metro region?

A: It is getting worse. I think the board of MUST saw the po-



John Moeller, executive director of MUST Ministries, said the organization is seeing growing numbers experiencing financial crises. JDType.com

tential for that years ago. We started looking at the Atlanta Regional Commission's information and anticipated a significant change in the demographics of the northwest metropolitan region. There was a tremendous forecast of increased diversity and, frankly, yes, an increase in the number of folks living in poverty. That has borne itself out. The situation is only exacerbated by the current economic conditions.

Q: If not for the economic nosedive of the past 18 months, would there still be escalating poverty?

A: Absolutely. We started planning several years ago in the anticipation that we would see more people living in poverty today. Even without the economic situations that we're living under, we would have still seen a dramatic increase.

Q: Poverty is growing faster

in metro Atlanta than other areas. Are we harder hit? Or is it because our infrastructure and services are not up to handling it?

A: I think we're harder hit because more jobs have been lost [through the housing industry decline]. As we study the folks who come through the door here every day, those folks who were working in the construction industry have really been the hardest hit. Those affiliated with that industry, in the banking industry, in the real estate markets, we're seeing all those folks.

Q: You're seeing bankers and real estate executives?

A: Exactly. We can talk a little about some of the demographic data we're seeing coming out of different ZIP codes — 30068 is one of the most affluent ZIP codes in all of Georgia. We're now seeing folks coming out of that ZIP code to this facility to receive assistance.

Q: You like to reach people early in a crisis. Why? Because you can prevent it from getting worse?

A: Absolutely. These folks who have been recently laid off, they still have material assets they'd like to protect. We can help

them with the job search. We can help them improve their skills. We can help them immediately with their economic needs. We can provide food for their pantry, which reduces their out-of-pocket expenses. We can make sure their children have the school supplies they need. We can make sure that Christmas happens for families. We can make sure people's rent and utilities are paid. We're in the business of helping folks stave off foreclosure and the loss of a roof overhead.

Q: Does this new breed of poor look different? Do they act different? Can you tell who they are when they come in?

A: I think you can. They are very unaccustomed to needing our help. They've had to swallow pride. They've always had good incomes, maybe they've had double incomes. They kind of come in with a deer-in-the-headlights face. In many cases, they are driving a late-model vehicle. These folks are very nervous about what can be offered.

Q: It's a diverse group, too — whites, Hispanics, blacks, Asian-Americans?

A: That is exactly the case.

Q: What do you think government could or should be doing?

A: I'd like to compliment the response that we've seen from our government. The [federal] stimulus has indeed brought resources to bear during these economic times to families who have been recently displaced out of jobs.

Q: Do you ever see people on the verge of giving up?

A: I would say that that's the hardest thing that our volunteers face every day. The sense of despair on the faces of folks who frankly have never been in this situation before. By the time they come to us, they are despairing. They are often within a month of being evicted from their home. It presents itself with a variety of emotions. There's grief, sadness, fear, anger at the world. They are an emotional group of folks.

Q: Has the number of donors been growing in proportion to the need?

A: No. Funding has remained steady, so we've been fortunate. But when you see the need increase by 50 percent over a two-year period — that's what it's been — the funding has not kept up with the demand.