

# **Athens County Job and Family Services:**

## The stories of a few of our clients

### May 2009

**It wasn't that long ago that Charlee had everything going for her.** The 24-year-old Athens County resident was paying all of her bills, as well as making her mortgage and truck payments, and she was building a good life for her and her four-year-old son.

A single mother, she was receiving Ohio Works First funding and Food Assistance Program funding and it was helping a great deal. She also was working nights, starting a second job and even going to school to become a nurse. Charlee knew that all of her hard work was going to pull her off public assistance, and she was very proud of everything she had accomplished.

A September 2008 car crash, though, caused her to lose nearly everything. She broke her leg, suffered nerve damages and other injuries, and spent weeks in the hospital. She is now recuperating at home, but is unable to work and faces more surgeries. She has a metal rod in her leg, has a tough time walking, has to take pain medications and has no way to pay most of her bills.

"I've let everything go," Charlee said. She knows that it will not be long before her phone service, cable and utilities are shut off, but she has no way to keep up with the bills. She is also behind on her mortgage payments and knows she will lose her home. Everything is slipping away from her, and there is nothing she can do about it.

She receives \$355 a month in OWF funding and \$223 a month in food assistance funding. That's all of the money she has coming in. Her family and friends have helped in numerous ways, and that support made it possible for her to get through Christmas. She knows, though, that there is not much other help out there for her, and she wishes the state would increase benefits or make some changes to help people in need.

"It ruined my whole life," Charlee said about the accident.

**"I know grandparents who go through the last part of winter without heat,"** Lyda Gunter said. The Glouster-area resident is one of the 88,000 Ohio grandparents who are serving as the primary caregivers for their grandchildren.

"There's no way you can feed growing children with the amount of food stamps you get, even if you feed them just cereal and milk," Gunter said. For the grandparents who receive OWF funding, it is simply not enough at \$259 per month for one child and then \$355 for two, increasing slightly with each additional child. Grandparents don't have enough money to pay for school fees, clothes and extra expenses that the children have.

"Every cent that we have goes toward caring for these children," she added. "Some of them, if they get to take their grandkids to McDonald's just once a month, it's time for celebration." If grandparents could receive assistance with health care, car repairs or other expenses it would help a great deal, she said. Lyda is thankful that Ohio does provide some funding for grandparents through kinship care, but said that the amount and the time period for the funding need to be increased.

**Catherine Hogsett, 27, wants more than anything to move her family to a place where they can have a new start, but right now, she has a hard time just moving herself from room to room because of her back problems.**

The Gloucester resident is a single mother with two children, ages 5 and 7. In 2001, she was working on her parents' farm moving bales of hay when she ruptured a disc in her back and had to have surgery. The surgery included taking pieces of bone from her hip and putting them in her back. She also had a metal plate, two rods and four screws placed in her back.

"It makes it very difficult to walk," Hogsett said. She is in constant pain, cannot sit or stand in one place for very long and walks gingerly to avoid hurting her back. In her current condition, there is no way she can work. She cares for her two children and gets by on very little.

Each month, Hogsett receives \$400 in child support, as well as funding from the Food Assistance program. She also receives Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funding to help pay her rent. The phone and cable are each shut off every few months, and are only turned back on when she has some extra cash.

In order to get by, she does what she can to care for her children, going to food banks when she needs extra food and helping them around the house in any way that she can.

"There are days when I'll go without breakfast or lunch or both so they can have food," Hogsett said. She wishes that she could receive cash assistance funding without losing her child support money and she wishes she could receive more assistance through the food program. She also just wishes she could walk again and work again so she could get off public assistance and live independently.

**Lisa worked steadily for several employers in recent years, but when she became pregnant with her third child, she became very ill.**

"I had to stop working," she said, adding that she stayed physically ill for several weeks even after having the baby. After finally recovering from the illness, she was out of work, had no income, and was raising three children all by herself.

She became very depressed, felt overwhelmed and anxious, and did not feel right mentally. She admits she made some poor choices, and turned to drugs in an effort to feel better. At that time, she had her children stay with her parents because she was not in a good frame of mind to care for them. She drifted through life in this way for a few months until one night when she told herself that she needed to get her life back together.

After that, she got away from the drugs and the people associated with them, rented a home (with some assistance from her parents) and got her children back. Today, she is working in the community, rebuilding her life and trying to get off of public assistance.

"I never wanted to use cash assistance. It was a big step for me to get it," Lisa said. However, Lisa doesn't want help. She wants to properly care for her children and pay her bills. She is thankful for the cash assistance, but said that if it could provide more monthly funding, or even just increase the funding during different times of the year such as Christmas or back-to-school time when expenses go up, it would be a big help.

"I feel like I'm getting back on track with my life," Lisa said. "I'm just not quite there yet."

**Public education should be free, but school fees, supplies and other extra costs make school very expensive and extremely difficult for many Ohio parents. Here are comments from a few of them:**

**Jennifer Pierce, a single mom** living in Tupper Plains, has three children in school and simply can't pay the fees all at once at the beginning of each school year.

"I just try to pay one at a time," Pierce said, adding that she spreads out the payments throughout the year. If the fees are not paid by the end of the year, the district can hold onto her children's grade cards.

It's also expensive paying for all of the school supplies, Pierce said. One year, she had to send in expensive extra supplies such as a roll of film and a package of copy paper, and it was hard to come up with the money.

"Plus, if they play sports, you have to pay for that," Pierce said. A \$50 fee allows students in the district to play sports, but the parents still have to pay for cleats and other items for their children. Most field trips are paid for, but the eighth grade trip to Washington, D.C. this year cost \$500 and was simply out of reach for Pierce's son.

"He couldn't go because I didn't have the money to pay for him to go," she said.

**Lisa Roberts, who lives in Coolville** and runs the Friends and Neighbors Community Food Center in Lottridge, said that school fees are very hard on her clients and were also tough on her family. Many families can't put money aside for the fees because they simply don't have an extra \$20 or \$35 at the end of the month for the fees.

"They keep telling your kid over and over, 'Your school fees haven't been paid.' They ask in front of the class," Roberts said. "It's horrible for the child and it's bad for the parent, too, because you're already feeling bad enough that you can't come up with the money." The teachers do what they can to be nice to the children, but they have to ask for the fees because the schools have to collect them, Roberts said.

"Plus, you have to send all those supplies. (The list of supplies) is enormous. They want you to bring all kinds of stuff," Roberts said. The list of supplies often includes several boxes of tissues, even though most families she knows can't afford tissues and just use toilet paper instead, Roberts said.

"You can't very well send toilet paper in to your teacher," she added.

**Rhonda Bentley, manager of the Nelsonville Family Center**, said she sees families every year who have trouble paying for the fees and the supplies.

"I've paid the fees for a lot of the families over the years," Bentley said. She is frustrated when she hears from parents who have to take in eight different colors of folders that cannot be found at the discount stores, in addition to other expensive supplies that often cost between \$70 and \$80 per child.

"If people don't have the money, they don't have the money," Bentley said. The Nelsonville Family Center collects school supply donations each year and then allows local families to pick up the supplies for free while they last.

**Several parents at the Nelsonville Family Center** said that while the elementary schools their children attend do not charge instruction fees, the supply fees and other costs throughout the year are very expensive. In addition, many schools are now asking for a second round of supplies halfway through the year.

Portia Turner said that all of the fees add up throughout the year, especially for parents who have several children in school.

Sherry Vincent paid \$112 for school supplies for her children in the fall. It was hard to find the money for the school supplies, and it meant that she could not pay some other expenses that month.

One problem that Mike Arnold sees is with the pizza parties at elementary schools. He said, and other parents agreed, that if the students do not have \$2 to help pay for the pizza, they are not allowed to have any pizza, even if the party was designed as a reward for the class. Students who do not have money for items like class trips to the movies are also not allowed to go, Arnold said.

“It’s outrageous,” Vincent said. “If you don’t have the money, you’re just left out.”

Arnold added that one of his sons is in the high school chorus and wanted to go on a \$600 trip with the group. The students worked hard on fundraising projects for the trip, but his son was only able to raise \$300. Arnold did not have the money to cover the rest of the cost.

“He didn’t get to go,” he said. Arnold did not think that was fair, and said it also is not right that high school students have to pay extra fees for classes like home economics, band and woodworking.

**Tara McGee of Millfield** has two children in elementary school and pays \$30 per child in fees. She receives Ohio Works First cash assistance, and learned this year that she could receive a waiver for the fees, and she was grateful for that. Every year before, she paid the fees, even though it was difficult coming up with the money.

“If you don’t pay the school fees, then you don’t get the report cards and they are not allowed to go on field trips with the rest of the class, and I just don’t think that’s fair,” McGee said. The fees are hard on families on limited incomes, especially those with more than one child and McGee said the fees should be eliminated.

“That’s quite a bit of money,” McGee said

Her children also each had a list of 15 to 20 school supply items to take in at the beginning of the year, and she paid between \$70 and \$80 on the supplies. The students also bring home order forms for school pictures twice a year, book fairs several times during the year and other special activities.

“Then they send home all these other things, selling this and selling that, that’s just so ridiculously expensive,” McGee said. The children were selling items like cookie dough that costs \$14 and wrapping paper that costs \$12 per roll, she said.

“I got the impression from my children that they were under a lot of pressure from the teachers to sell, sell, sell,” McGee said. She could not afford much, and she lives out in the country where her children cannot walk to the neighbors to try to sell items, she explained. Her sons were both disappointed because they could not sell as much as the other children and they did not receive the prizes that other children who sold more received.

“Both of my boys were pretty upset,” McGee said.