

Athens County Job and Family Services:

The stories of a few of our clients

March 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, formerly known as Food Stamps, 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 had worked so hard for. She broke her leg, suffered nerve damages and other injuries, and spent weeks in the hospital recovering. She is now out of the hospital and is recuperating at home, but she is unable to work and faces more surgeries. She has a metal rod in her leg, has a tough time walking, has to take medications for the pain and simply 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 pay the bills. She is 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 \$336 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.

Leslie Miller knows she will be able to live independently in a few years, but for now, she and her daughter need help to get by.

Miller, 34, lives in Athens with her 4 ½ year old daughter. Last summer, she earned her bachelor's degree in child and family studies from Ohio University. She works full-time, has started a non-profit corporation that she runs in addition to her work, and cares for her daughter.

As a single parent with a low income, though, she simply can't get by without some assistance, and even then has a very tough time. Miller separated from her daughter's father last year and moved to Athens County in the summer of 2008. In Athens, she and her daughter are able to live in assisted housing where the rent is \$320 per month. Miller likes her apartment and has friends and co-workers who live in the complex. Her daughter also has made several friends among the neighbors.

With the small income from her job, the child support she receives and the food nutrition funding, she is just above the federal poverty level. All of her bills, though, eat up her monthly income quickly along with her student loans and credit card debt. If she could see even a small increase in the food nutrition funding, it would mean a great deal for her and her daughter.

She knows that eventually her work will pay enough for her to take care of her daughter, and for now, she just needs a little help.

Lyda Gunter talks often with other grandparents who are raising their grandchildren, and she said that many people are much worse off than she is.

"I know grandparents who go through the last part of winter without heat," the Glouster area resident said. By the end of the winter, their HEAP payments have run out and there is no money left to pay the utility bills.

Many grandparents also have a difficult time providing enough food for their grandchildren, even if they receive funding from the food assistance program. "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," Lyda said.

For the grandparents who receive OWF funding, that funding is simply not enough at \$259 per month for one child and then \$355 for two, increasing with each additional child. Grandparents don't have enough money to pay for school fees, clothes and extra expenses that the children have, Lyda said.

"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 it is only a small amount and can only be received for up to three years. The amount and the time period for the funding need to be increased.

Currently in Ohio, 88,000 grandparents are serving as the primary caregivers to their grandchildren, according to a 2005 U.S. Census Bureau report. Half of these grandparents provide care for more than one grandchild, and more than half of the children being cared for by grandparents are six years old or younger.

Athens County Job and Family Services Client Stories 2009

Catherine Hogsett 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.

Hogsett, 27, is a single mother with two children, ages 5 and 7. She lives in Glouster, and has lived in the area for most of her life.

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 nutrition program. She also receives Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funding to help pay her rent.

The child support money has to pay part of the rent, and then cover as many other bills as possible. The phone and cable each are shut off every few months, and then when she is able to get some extra money she pays to get them turned back on.

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.

"I really want to get out of this town for my kids' sake," Hogsett said. Outside her home, she sees people doing drugs and selling drugs, and she does not want her children to be exposed to that. She wants to be able to have a nice home in a nice neighborhood for her children, away from the drugs and problems in her neighborhood.

Tara worked steadily for several employers in recent years and things were going pretty well for her. When she became pregnant with her third child, though, 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 did not have a stable home because she was moving from place to place, and she felt it was better for her children to be with her parents. Tara 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.

“It just hit me. I don’t deserve to sleep on someone’s floor. I don’t want to sleep on someone’s floor,” Tara said. She added that she said to herself, “Tara, what the hell are you doing? Where are you? Where are your kids?”

After that point, she got away from the drugs and the people associated with it, rented a home (with some assistance from her parents), got her children back and began rebuilding her life.

Today, she is involved with the job programs at The Work Station in The Plains, and is actively looking for a job.

“Right now, I need to get a job and get off of assistance,” Tara said. She receives \$536 per month in cash assistance and \$588 per month in food assistance funding. The food funding does not cover the grocery needs for the family for the entire month, and cash assistance only goes so far, especially when you consider that her rent is \$350 per month.

It’s difficult to find a job, though, that either will allow her to bring her one-year-old with her or that will pay her enough that she can also pay for childcare while she works.

“I never wanted to use cash assistance. It was a big step for me to get it,” Tara said. She goes to food banks when she needs extra food, and her parents help her out from time to time.

However, Tara doesn’t want help. She wants to have her own steady job again so she can properly care for her children and pay her bills. She wants to be able to buy her own Christmas and birthday presents for her children instead of relying on others.

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’m trying hard to get a job. I’m trying hard to get out of Ohio,” Tara said. She wants to make a fresh start somewhere where there are more job possibilities, and she hopes to be able to build a better life for her children.

“I feel like I’m getting back on track with my life,” Tara said. “I’m just not quite there yet.”