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The recent economic downturn has exacerbated homelessness, already a year round problem, said activists and volunteers at Mr. Rogers Homelessness Panel on Tuesday evening.

Terry Araman of Lodestar Day Resource Center said he's concerned about what will happen when governments start budget cuts.

"A lot of us in social services are very concerned," Araman said. "When budgets for basic services that are run by state programs are cut, a lot of the overflow goes to non-profits."

But non-profits are already seeing an increased demand, Araman said, and are facing similar budget losses too.

Janet Garcia, Vice President of Sun Valley United Way, described the most common scenario.

“Often times it’s not something that happens overnight,” Garcia said. “It tends to be one thing on top of another that leads someone who’s formerly housed into homelessness.”

Garcia said that it often takes unfortunate events like the death of a homeless man on a bench in front of the Herberger Theater to trigger awareness in people.

“It’s easy to ignore something if you don’t know someone,” said Garcia. “When we get that story out it makes a difference and people respond.”

Those who work with the homeless would like the public to react sooner.

Laura Ditroia, also at Lodestar Day Recourse Center, explains the importance of volunteers who work with the homeless.

“A lot of people lack trust,” said Ditroia. “Outreach and engagement is huge.”

Madeleine Heck is Director of Operations at Maggie’s Place, and says that volunteers there work with residents to teach them skills like budgeting, household management,

and job hunting– skills that are crucial for staying off the streets in the long-term.

Ditroia says organizations like Lodestar encourage people who make it off the streets to stay involved and learn more skills to help them stay housed.

“We also encourage them to come back and volunteer,” Ditroia said.

Not having the opportunity to learn these skills also raises the chances of becoming homeless for the first time, Garcia said.

“One of the populations that’s most likely to be homeless is foster children,” said Garcia.

Garcia said these children are often pulled from homes that have no systems to begin with, and told at 18 that they are on their own.

Chris Spahle, a downtown ambassador for Downtown Phoenix Partnership, said that just paying attention to the homeless at holidays or in extreme weather conditions is not enough.

“We should be focused on [homelessness] all the time, not just when something unfortunate happens,” Spahle said.

October 25-31 has been named Arizona Homelessness Awareness Week, according to a flyer distributed at the panel.

Of Arizona’s estimated 19,000 homeless, about 42 percent, or 8,000, live in Maricopa, according to the flyer.

Araman says that the current year's statewide homelessness numbers are up from the previous year's count of 14,500.

The flyer includes statewide statistics including population numbers on homelessness, resources, a section called "Dispelling Myths," and the success story of a formerly homeless man who used these resources to get himself off the streets.

Araman said that these numbers are based on a count carried out nationally each year in January.