

WILL YOU HAVE A HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS?

By Michael Stoller

These days, many New Yorkers aren't asking "Will you be home for the holidays?" Sadly, they're asking "Will you have a home for the holidays?" Poverty has increased across the U.S., but according to the Pew Hispanic Center, "a greater share of Hispanics in 2010 lived in poverty than any other group," based on the Census Bureau's new Supplemental Poverty Measure. Median household wealth among Hispanics had already fallen: from \$18,359 in 2005 to \$6,325 in 2009. The drop of 66 percent "was the largest among all racial and ethnic groups," according to a new report by the Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends project.

In New York City the numbers are particularly shocking: according to the Citizens Committee for Children of New York City, 50 percent of all Latino children in the Bronx live in poverty, and in Manhattan, "a child who is black or Latino is nearly ten times more likely than a white child to live in poverty."

Rates of Latino poverty are rising at the same time that private and public funding for health services, housing, child care, elder care, food pantries, and after-school programs is declining. These human service supports enable New Yorkers to get and keep jobs. Parents can't work if they don't have quality child care that keeps their children safe and stimulated, if they can't rely on after-school programs, if they can't find care for aging relatives, or if they are ill or hungry themselves. Nonprofit human services organizations assist New Yorkers in all these areas and more.

Housing assistance is particularly critical, and there are numerous examples of New Yorkers who have homes for the holidays only thanks to their local human services organizations. For instance, there's Edgar Restrepo, 71, a Queens resident originally from Colombia, who was physically attacked in 1990 while working as a journalist. The assault blinded him and left him unable to work. He lived on disability for 20 years and had a rent-paying tenant in his home. When

the tenant stopped paying rent a year ago, Restrepo fell behind on his mortgage payments. His elder-care nurse referred him to Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, which helped with his mortgage and kept him in his home.

Rosa, 30, is a resident of East Harlem. For several years she has been a client of LSA Family Health Service (Little Sisters of the Assumption) and has benefitted from LSA's Maternity Outreach program as well as its food pantry. She and her family of three struggle to survive on food stamps and almost lost their apartment a few months ago. LSA staff helped Rosa with the paperwork so she could apply for an external program for families receiving public assistance and receive help with her rent. Without this assistance, the family might have lost its apartment.

We are encouraged that Governor Cuomo and state legislators have adopted reforms to the tax code that will ease tax burdens on lower- and middle-income New Yorkers. But we are concerned that the new measures will leave the state government with a deficit of about \$2 billion dollars for its 2012 budget and put human services programs at risk of further cuts.

State legislators have repeatedly cut funding for human services when faced with budget deficits. At a time when the need for these services is rising in New York City and across the state – when workers need help putting food on the table and keeping roofs over their families' heads – we have to let our State Senators and Assemblymembers know how much we care about human services and that we can't afford any more cuts. Call or write to them now, before they start to work on next year's state budget. Tell them that you care.