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## Economic troubles force more into counseling

**By Deanna Allen**  
Staff Writer

LAWRENCEVILLE - Gwinnett County families are turning to counseling in record numbers due to the recession, according to Families First, the largest nonprofit family service agency in the state.

Last year, the agency served 2,475 clients from Gwinnett County. In the past eight months, Families First has seen a 27 percent increase in requests for anger management, a 16 percent increase in requests for general counseling and a 15 percent increase in requests for interventions between unmarried parents. With families losing their homes and individuals losing their jobs, Gwinnett counselors are seeing ripple effects in relationship stress, child misconduct, family violence and substance abuse.

Heather Bremus is a licensed clinical social worker and has worked for Families First for more than eight years.

"I've seen some economic downturns before, such as 2001, right after Sept. 11," Bremus said. "This time, I'm seeing all the different socioeconomic statuses (affected). It's just been even more devastating."

Bremus works three days a week out of the Families First office in Norcross and two days a week at the DeKalb office.

"I think I'm seeing more of a devastation in Gwinnett because these are the people who had the big, nice homes and the big, nice SUVs and are having to move into apartment homes," Bremus said.

Her DeKalb clients, she said, were already at a lower socioeconomic level and haven't seen such a dramatic change in their lifestyles.

Bremus, who speaks Spanish, often works with Hispanic clients. She has found in many of the families she assists, the fathers are unable to find jobs in landscaping, construction and other labor fields in Gwinnett and are having to travel out of state to find work. This leaves mothers alone to care for their children. As a result of their fathers' absences, Bremus said, children are disobeying their mothers and fighting in schools.

Norcross resident Eve Ruiz sought counseling after her husband relocated to North Carolina.

"He had to leave because the company he was working for, they didn't have any work here in Georgia," Ruiz said. "They offered him a position where he could go to North Carolina. He took it because there was nothing here."

After her husband took his new job, Ruiz began seeing a drop in their 10-year-old son's grades.

"He was having trouble with school and just the fact that his dad wasn't here, it was really hard on him," Ruiz said.



**Staff Photo: Jonathan Phillips**  
Heather Bremus, one of the counselors working for Families First in Norcross, counsels Doug (last name withheld for reasons of privacy), who was laid off from his job in February, during a session June 19.

The Head Start program in which her son is involved referred Ruiz to Family First for counseling.

"A lot of families are coming in through school referrals," Bremus said. "And I would say this is really not just with the Latino families. (The problem) crosses all racial and socioeconomic lines."

Since Ruiz's husband relocated to North Carolina, two companies he has worked for have filed for bankruptcy. He returned to Georgia and has gone back to school to obtain his GED. He works full time now for a Publix grocery store.

Ruiz, previously a stay-at-home mother of four, also works for Publix, her first job.

"It's taking a lot from my children who are used to having their mom with them," Ruiz said.

Forced separations aren't just affecting children who now have a parent - or even both parents - who is absent much of the time.

"It's because of the economy but it's leading to marital problems," Bremus said, "and then, of course, trickling down to the children feeling abandoned by their parent even though the parent does not want to do this."

In late 2001, as the economy reacted to the events of Sept. 11, Bremus said many clients she saw were upper middle-class men who had been laid off from technology and high-power businesses jobs. Despite job losses, she said, many of the suburban Gwinnett families affected were able to keep their homes and generally maintain their lifestyles with savings or because wives were able to take on jobs to supplement the family income.

"Basic level needs are being threatened (this time)," Bremus said. "I'm getting a lot more depression, anxiety. It's triggering more emotional and mental health issues because (clients) don't have their basic needs being met."

Bremus said many of her clients were previously upper middle-class families who are going into foreclosure and are being forced to move into apartments and use services they haven't needed to use before.

"Middle and upper middle-class families are having to use resources that previously lower socioeconomic families have used all along," Bremus said. "These agencies are just being inundated with clients."

Bremus is seeing many clients seeking counseling services after being laid off from their jobs.

"A lot of the people being laid off are middle age so they're not quite ready for retirement and they're not really young," Bremus said. "They're supposed to be at a point in their career when they've done their time and are stable."

"People are just at the end of their rope right now because of their stress," Bremus continued. "They're angry at the world. They don't know how to cope with it."

But coping with the effects of the recession is possible, she stressed.

"Counseling can enable them to get empathy and support, validate their feelings, release stress and anxiety, and to gain an understanding of why they feel this way," Bremus said.

Gwinnett families can also seek help through local agencies and organizations. Bremus recommended the United Way 211 helpline as a starting point.

To help children cope with changes they are experiencing, Bremus said communication reassuring kids that these situations are not their responsibility is important, as well as reinforcing that they are safe. She

discouraged parents from discussing financial problems around their children.

"Even though it has been so devastating, I think for a lot of the families, coming into counseling is helping instill hope that they are going to be OK," Bremus said. "I think one of the most powerful things that the families have seen in counseling is realizing they're not alone."