

NEW MEXICO

Extreme poverty tough to combat in rural areas

By Diana Del Mauro

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New Mexico has the fourth highest rate of extreme poverty.

In 2005, 7.8 percent of the population earned half the U.S. Census thresholds for poverty. That breaks down to 146,850 people — many of whom live in rural pockets of the state, Indian reservations and near the Mexican border — struggling to make it from day to day.

Angela is a 41-year-old woman raising two sons in a small town 30 minutes outside Santa Fe.

“Basically, we have to live pretty meagerly,” she said. “Sometimes I don’t have enough money for sanitary napkins or toilet paper or water.”

Angela says if she didn’t have such a kind-hearted boss, she’d be much more down and out than she is on \$5,124 a year. “I’m pretty lucky. I have an employer who’s good to me,” said Angela, who didn’t want to use her real name.

“Without it, I don’t know what I’d do.”

Her 7-year-old developed water on the brain (hydrocephalus) as an infant and has undergone nine brain surgeries. A pump sucks excess water out of his head and empties it into his belly.

Her 9-year-old is also developmentally delayed, and despite being two years apart, the boys have the same weight, 54.5 pounds.

And then there are Angela’s back problems, depression and anxiety. She said it hurts to hoist 100-pound bales of hay, but she doesn’t mind trimming the horses’ feet.

“I feel like I need to apply for disability,” she said. “I’m an anxious person. I worry a lot.”

As a ranch hand, Angela gets a place to live rent-free and can borrow her boss’s car until she can afford tires for her 1971 Chevy flatbed truck.

Between \$312 a month in food stamps and occasional stops at soup kitchens and food pantries, she manages to put food on the table. Meanwhile, she gets assistance in paying her utilities through a federal program, and Medicaid foots the family’s monumental medical bills.

Her biggest expense is gasoline, given the three times a week she drives to Santa Fe for medical appointments.

She’d be sunk if she didn’t have so much government help, but getting the benefits is time-consuming and burdensome.

“I don’t feel like the government really cares,” she said. “I just feel like a number.”

Still, Angela remembers when times were worse. Because her mother was a drug addict, she had to raise herself and her siblings, and because she was bullied in Santa Fe schools, she never finished the ninth grade, even after repeating it three times.

“I lived in a car for a year. I lived in a leaky old shack for a year,” she said. “It’s made me who I am.”

As rough as Angela’s life sounds, state officials and economists say poverty is decreasing slightly in New Mexico.

Gerry Bradley, research director of New Mexico Voices for Children, said economic growth is making a difference. “The story in New Mexico, at least in terms of total poverty is — believe it or not — we’re improving a little,” he said. “It’s certainly not getting worse here.”

But he also said that it will take more targeted initiatives to bring the poverty level

down dramatically.

“A lot of people are out of the labor force in rural New Mexico,” he said.

Ideally, that would mean bringing jobs to the people, Bradley said. But that’s not always realistic in isolated areas, he admits.

“If jobs can’t come to rural New Mexico, maybe people should be coming to the jobs — and that’s really hard to say,” Bradley said. “My ideal is to get jobs to where the people are.”

But he said not much has replaced the old mining jobs in rural New Mexico, other than call centers and casinos.

“Nothing took the place and people didn’t really leave in droves,” Bradley said.

Another problem: He believes people in the Hispanic northern villages and Navajo communities have been excluded from the state’s economy.

“I think they’re excluded by poor education, by not having good teachers and by language barriers,” Bradley said.

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