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## Miami-Dade

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### Goal of agencies: 'Food for All'

Planners start summit tonight

By JONI JAMES  
[jjames@herald.com](mailto:jjames@herald.com)

The doors don't officially open until 3 p.m. but the diners start arriving an hour early.

There's Mike Williams, a 58-year-old out-of-work welder. Williams is now homeless and counts on the free meals served by the Camillus House Shelter to help make ends meet while he takes an air-conditioning repair course.

Then there's Shariff, 24, who wouldn't give his last name but talked about arriving from North Carolina only to find work in South Florida hard to come by. And 65-year-old Sam Rodriguez, who says the free daily meals help stretch his Social Security benefits further.

A year ago, the Catholic social service agency served between 900 and 1,100 free meals daily at its downtown shelter and at the Beckham Hall facility near Jackson Memorial Hospital. Nowadays, that number can reach 1,500.

With the economy continuing to sputter, some of Miami-Dade's largest soup kitchens and food banks say they're seeing more demand. And according to U.S. Department of Agriculture, Florida residents are among the least likely in the nation to receive the food stamps they qualify for.

That paradox is prompting Miami-Dade County's social service agencies to meet tonight at Miami's Temple Israel for the start of a



SERVING THE HUNGRY: At Camillus House Shelter in Miami, Mary Devola Dorsey Powell, front, and Alberto Franco, are among those being served by volunteers on Tuesday. MARIKO CROWE/FOR THE HERALD

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two-day "Food for All" summit, aimed at streamlining area services and tapping resources, such as the federal food stamp program, that are underused.

"We're trying to bring together a group of people and try to come up with some solutions," said Judith Gatti, executive director of Daily Bread Food Bank, which expects to distribute more than 18 million pounds of food this year to the nonprofit groups in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties that feed the poor.

Miami's population was recognized in the 2000 U.S. Census as the nation's poorest: 28.5 percent of the city's residents are below the poverty line. But federal officials have long estimated that at least one-third of those in poverty are also potentially hungry on any given day because they lack the security of knowing where they will get their next meal.

Social workers in South Florida suspect the rate may be even higher here due to the region's high rental rates that can leave even working individuals or families with too few dollars for shelter and food.

"When we say the hungry, we are talking about people who skip meals because they don't have enough money or they're relying on emergency food services," said Daniella Levine, executive director of the Human Services Coalition, which organized the summit.

Tuesday at Camillus House, nearly all the diners agreed on one thing: that without the free meal, they'd go hungry.

"On Sundays, I usually don't eat," because Camillus House is closed, said 19-year-old John, who declined to give his last name but said he'd been living on the street since he was 12.

Among the strategies expected to emerge at the summit: Getting all nonprofits that provide free meals or food boxes information to pass out on how to qualify for food stamps or other aid.

According a 2000 federal study, 52 percent of eligible Florida residents were receiving food stamps, the ninth-worst rate in the nation.

Williams, the out-of-work welder, said he'd decided not to get food stamps until he finishes his air-conditioning training next month. "There's a lot of red tape," he said, ``and I was afraid they'd make me quit school and find some kind of job. . . . Sometimes you take two steps back but you'll eventually end up ahead."

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