

A new face for homelessness in Bergen County

[Bergen County](#) officials say they've noticed a different kind of resident showing up lately at the county's homeless shelter in [Hackensack](#) — people who lost their jobs during the recession and have since been unemployed.

ELIZABETH LARA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Like many of the newest residents of the county shelter, Jim Serino became unemployed. Now, he's learning a new skill.

When the county shelter first opened in October 2009, the focus was on the kind of chronically homeless people who were found living under bridges, in cars or generally on the street, the shelter director, Julia Orlando, said last week.

The county was able to identify about 89 chronically homeless people, and for the most part, their needs were met by finding them transitional housing, Orlando said.

"We've made a significant impact on homelessness on the streets," Orlando said. "But we started seeing newer homeless, people who had lost jobs or were underemployed and unable to sustain themselves in this economy."

Many of these people had more skills and education than the chronically homeless, she said. So to address their needs, a group of people from several county agencies started a pilot project aimed more at finding jobs than housing.

So far, they say, the project has shown some promising results: one woman landed a job as a paralegal, one man found work as a cook, and another was able to do some warehouse work until his class time at Bergen Community College led him back to school.

Four shelter residents also have undergone a course on weatherization training offered at the [Bergen County](#) Community Action Program and are expected to get their certificates later this summer.

A new start

One of them is Jim Serino, a [Bogota](#) man who lost his job as a computer systems administrator and arrived at the shelter in April. Two weeks after his arrival, he signed up for the weatherization training, which teaches people how to insulate and seal homes.

"I thought I'd try something else for a change," he said, "since no one is hiring me with all my expertise."

Their numbers are small, but the impact on their lives is significant, the residents say.

"I'm on the road to getting my life back to where I can support myself," said Amanda, who has been offered a \$48,000-a-year paralegal job with the [Bergen County](#) Prosecutor's Office, pending the outcome of a background check. She agreed to be interviewed on the condition that her last name not be used, citing the stigma associated with being homeless.

Amanda, a 55-year-old [Ridgefield Park](#) woman, said she had worked for about 25 years as a paralegal before being laid off in August 2011 because of the weak economy.

At first she lived with her sister and then with some friends. Unable to find a job or contribute to the rent, she called the shelter and arrived on May 10.

"I had sent my résumés out and got no calls back," she said. "I was trying to do it on my own to get back on my feet, but nothing was working."

She added, "It was the best thing I did to come here."

Originally not part of the pilot project, Amanda was added at the insistence of one of the shelter employees who thought she would make a good candidate for the program.



She was one of five people with job skills that Orlando forwarded to Tammy Molinelli, executive director of the [Bergen County](#) Workforce Investment board for help with job coaching and placement.

In Amanda's case, Molinelli said she heard about the paralegal opening in a dinner conversation with her husband, John, the [Bergen County](#) prosecutor.

But Tammy Molinelli said Amanda earned the job because of her work skills and experience.

"She went through every single hoop the same as everyone else. There was certainly no favoritism for these folks," Tammy Molinelli said.

Another member of the pilot project was Martyn Gourrier, a 55-year-old [Teaneck](#) man who was able to find some work in two different warehouse jobs.

Gourrier arrived at the shelter on May 4 after being released from prison. He served a sentence after a conviction for eluding a police officer. Gourrier described himself as an Air Force veteran with a master's degree in economics from the University of Southern California.

He has since left the warehouse jobs to pursue a degree in computer science at Bergen Community College.

"It's a step up," Gourrier said of the pilot project. "I see some of the people that I grew up with who are homeless. That could be me if it wasn't for the grace of God and this program," he said.

Freeholder Robert Hermansen, who is the board's liaison to both the shelter and the Workforce Investment Board, said the pilot project will save taxpayers money whenever a resident can move out of the shelter after landing a job.

"Not only are we getting these individuals back to work, now they are becoming productive members of society," Hermansen said. "It's a win-win for everybody."