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CAROLINA HIDALGO | Times

Hillsborough County placed Sam Cruz Jr. and Melanie Bortz, and their children, from left, Sammie, now 5, Alex, 4, Kaiya, 6, and Karma, 3, and two other kids (not pictured) in a dirty, leaky trailer. Today they are renting a home, above, in West Tampa.

'Robbed' by the system

Hillsborough placed a family in squalid housing, and then recouped the assistance after disability payments kicked in.

BY WILL HOBSON; MICHAEL LAFORGIA
Times Staff Writers

Salvation for Sam Cruz Jr. and his family came from the unlikeliest of places: his tiny, disabled 4-year-old son.

Driven into homelessness when Cruz lost his job, the child, his parents and his five brothers and sisters turned to Hillsborough County for help. The county's Homeless Recovery program placed them in a cramped, bug-infested trailer that leaked when it rained.

In February 2012, the family found a ticket out. They were told that Sammie Cruz III's hearing prob-

lems entitled him to monthly disability payments from the federal government. Backdated to when he applied for aid, the first check would be \$2,700 — more than enough for the Cruz family to move somewhere better.

But instead of allowing the deaf 4-year-old to keep his money, county officials took most of it away from him.

They said it was repayment for the help Homeless Recovery had given his family.

It is common practice for local government agencies that help the poor to claw back aid from recipients who later qualify for federal disability checks.

But what happened to the Cruz family is another example of how Hillsborough County has harmed the



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Sam Cruz and Melanie Bortz watch TV with their children, from left, Karma, 3, Kaiya, 6, Benjamin, 13, Michael, 11, Sam, 5, and Alex, 4, at their Tampa home last week. The home they rent was recently bought in a foreclosure auction, and Cruz said the new owner is threatening to raise their \$540 rent.

homeless while trying to help them.

Over the past four months, the *Tampa Bay Times* has chronicled lax oversight and poor management that led to hundreds of homeless people being sent to housing that could not pass basic safety inspections.

For years, veterans, the disabled and families with small children have been forced to live among sex offenders or in cramped, bug-infested spaces.

In exchange for the substandard housing, many who qualified for federal disability were forced to give back thousands of dollars as repayment.

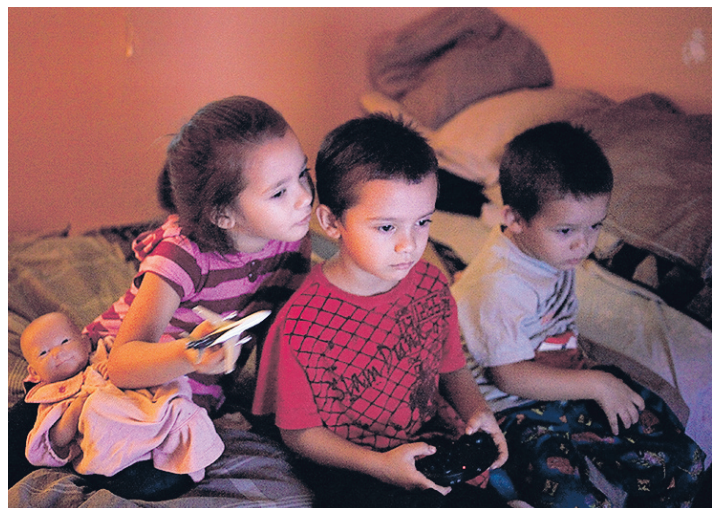
In at least a few cases identified by the *Times*, that wiped out any hope of moving somewhere else.

After the county took \$2,000 from Sammie Cruz's federal back payment, his family couldn't afford to leave the dilapidated trailer where the children regularly woke with termite wings in their hair.

Eventually, the county stopped helping with their rent. The family was homeless again in less than a year.

"I wouldn't have had a problem repaying them if they'd sent us to a place that was livable," said Cruz Jr., 28. "I felt like I was robbed."

In an interview Thursday, Hillsborough County Administrator Mike Merrill said what happened to the Cruz family is representative of systemic problems within the Homeless Recovery program. County officials will close the program by the end of the year, and they plan to turn operations over to several nonprofits.



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Kaiya Cruz, 6, leans over to speak to her brother, Sam, 5, center, while Alex, 4, watches TV last month. Because Sam is deaf, Kaiya said she has to lean in close for him to hear her. With the family in one place, Sammie is flourishing, his parents said.

"This whole thing is shocking to me," he said. "I'm not proud of what we've done."

'Desperately wrong'

Homeless advocates and experts in government welfare programs say Hillsborough County's program was set up to fail.

Before seeking to recoup costs from disability checks, the county did not try to find safe, permanent housing



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Earl Gadson, 57, wound up at the Good Samaritan Inn in 2010, when he showed up at the county asking for help.

for the homeless. It did not require properties housing the homeless to pass inspections.

As a result, Hillsborough County officials sent the homeless to live in squalid slums, then charged many of them thousands of dollars for staying there.

“The county is doing something desperately wrong,” said Ray Cebula of Cornell University’s Employment and Disability Institute.

In 1974, the federal government set up a system to encourage local governments to provide aid for disabled people who were waiting to get federal money.

The program essentially lets people borrow local tax dollars with the promise to pay it back when they get approved for federal help.

Before they get financial aid, clients sign contracts promising to repay the money if they or someone in their immediate family qualifies for federal disability.

In Hillsborough County, even families like the Cruzes, who faced the prospect of being homeless again, were required to pay. The county has no policies that allow caseworkers to make exceptions on who signs a repayment contract.

And once the contract is signed, it’s too late.

The process of garnishing federal disability checks is automated by computer, leaving local governments unable to choose who gets charged or how much.

“I don’t have that flexibility,” said Gene Earley, director of Hillsborough Health Care Services. “As much as I might like to have it, I don’t.”

\$1.3M

Amount the county department that includes the Homeless Recovery program has taken back from 885 needy people in the past five years.

That is especially problematic in Hillsborough County. Because of the way the county runs its homeless program, people in need can face huge bills.

In 2010, the most recent year for which records were available, only 10 of Florida’s 67 counties clawed back money from the needy, according to a Social Security Administration document.

Of those, only Hillsborough and Palm Beach counties used it to cover rent for housing they arranged for the homeless.

Rental assistance can be more expensive than other kinds of aid, including emergency funds for food or utility bills that many other counties provide.

In Palm Beach, officials cover rent for disabled homeless people and recoup money for it. But the county only places people at licensed assisted-living facilities that have been inspected by county staff, according to Claudia Tuck, director of the County Division of Human and Veteran Services.

Many other counties, like Miami-Dade and Pinellas, have turned over their homeless programs to nonprofit organizations, which by law can’t garnish federal disability money from the people they help.



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Lawrence Toomey, 60, lives at the Good Samaritan in a roughly 100-square-foot room with his cat, Poo.

If the Cruz family had become homeless in Pinellas, about 25 miles from where they first got evicted, they would not have been asked to repay the help they got. Pinellas County sends the chronically homeless to a county-funded shelter.

Families get sent to the Family Services Initiative, a public/private partnership funded through a special taxing district. The program spends about \$900,000 a year helping needy families, and sends homeless families to approved shelters or hotels that have been inspected.

Family Services Initiative relies solely on tax revenue to help the homeless.

“No one’s asking for any other money from anyone,” said Marcie Biddleman, executive director of the Pinellas County Juvenile Welfare Board. “Certainly not a client.”

Trapped in squalor

In the past five years, the county department that includes the Homeless Recovery program has taken back more than \$1.3 million from 885 needy people, records show.

That figure includes repayments from Homeless Recovery clients and from people helped by other county programs.

Instead of using the money it recouped from Homeless Recovery clients to help more poor people, the county pumped it back into its general-purpose coffers, according to Earley, the manager who oversees the reimbursements.

Sammie Cruz and his family were just one set of clients who had to pay back the county when their government check came in.

When Curtis Kingcade turned to Homeless Recovery in 2011, he thought his caseworker was arranging housing with medical care. Kingcade, 58, had just had two toes amputated because of a blood-clotting disorder.

Instead of sending him to an assisted living facility, the caseworker sent Kingcade to Bay Gardens Retirement Village, a dirty and perennially troubled unlicensed care home. When Kingcade later qualified for federal aid, he said, the county took about \$5,000 of \$6,400 in back payments.

“I thought it was supposed to be money, as it added up, to better myself,” Kingcade said. “It was a big shock.”

Earl Gadson, 57, wound up at the Good Samaritan Inn in 2010, when he showed up at the county asking for help.

The county paid his rent for nine months until he qualified for federal aid in 2011 because he is epileptic.

He didn’t get a cent from his first check, he said, written for \$6,000 to cover months of back payments.

The lawyer he hired to qualify for the benefit took \$1,500. Hillsborough County took the rest to cover his stay at the rooming house.

Gadson still lives at Good Samaritan. At night, he lines the door to his small room with a towel, to keep the bugs out. He’d like to move, but he can’t afford it.

“I’m stuck,” Gadson said. “And I’m going to be stuck.”

Lawrence Toomey, 60, lives at the Good Samaritan in a roughly 100-square-foot room with his cat, Poo. A

former private investigator and cook, Toomey walked through Homeless Recovery's doors in 2009, he said. His caseworker sent him to the troubled rooming house on N Florida Avenue.

He said he was attacked by roommates twice in his first year there, once with a knife. He qualified for federal aid in May 2011, because of a digestive ailment. He was due a lump sum of about \$10,000. But after his lawyer took \$2,500 and the county took its cut, he said, he was left with barely enough to cover groceries and another month at the Good Samaritan.

More than two years later, he's still there. He lives month to month on roughly \$700 in federal aid, and whatever he can make in a few shifts working concessions at the Tampa Bay Times Forum.

He doesn't know how he'll ever save enough to move to a decent place.

"The system is set up, once you become homeless, you can't get out," Toomey said. "As long as you keep the homeless off the streets, as long as you keep them where no one can see them ... nobody cares."

Back on the brink

Nearly two years after the county took their money, the Cruz family is no closer to stability.

Sam Cruz hasn't worked since a temporary warehouse job in June. A high school graduate who has taken a variety of manual labor jobs over the years, he applied recently at Home Depot, McDonald's and Checkers.

His girlfriend, Melanie Bortz, 32, stays home to care for their children.

Today, the family is together under one roof, in a two-bedroom duplex not far from the Homeless Recovery office in West Tampa.

But the Cruzes fear it won't be long before Sammie has to again pack up his favorite toys, a three-foot castle and an orange dragon, and move on to the next place.

\$2,000

Amount Hillsborough County took from Sammie Cruz's federal disability aid as back payment.

The home they rent was recently bought in a foreclosure auction, and Cruz said the new owner is threatening to raise their \$540 rent.

Their only income is Sammie's \$710 monthly disability check, food stamps, and \$50 a week Cruz earns selling plasma. They expect to have to find another house soon.

When things get really bad, Cruz and his girlfriend do what they have to. They've spent the night in abandoned houses or in a friend's car.

During those times, they send Sammie and his siblings to stay with their grandmother. It has happened so often that the children associate seeing relatives with losing their home.

With his family in one place, Sammie is flourishing.

Lately he has devoured the books his kindergarten teacher gives him. His favorite is Green Eggs and Ham.

"I think he likes it because his name is in it," his mother said. "Sam-I-Am."

Sammie used to go days without talking, but now he's speaking up more.

He has learned to ask his parents for the things that keep him occupied, like video games or a chance to ride his scooter.

But when his parents tell him he's going to visit relatives, there's only one question on his mind.

He asks it nervously, not believing the answer.

"Am I coming home?"

Times researcher John Martin contributed to this report. Will Hobson can be reached at (813) 226-3400 or whobson@tampabay.com. Michael LaForgia can be reached at mlaforfia@tampabay.com.