

Families put strain on system

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WELFARE agencies are straining to meet a growing demand for emergency assistance as struggling families buckle under the pressure of crippling petrol prices, interest rate rises and soaring cost of prescription drugs.

Doncare family services manager Christine Ellerton said demand for financial assistance to buy food, petrol and medication had almost doubled in the past three years.

She said the service had been forced to limit the number of times it could help any one person.

"But we always try to offer them something," Ms Ellerton said.

"If we run out of food vouchers we'll give them something from the cupboard.

"Demand has been growing by 15 per cent or more each year, particularly for medications that are not listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

"A family with two or three kids who are sick just can't afford over-the-counter medi-

cation. This is happening during autumn. Things will only get worse in winter."

Victorian Council of Social Services chief executive Cath Smith said hundreds of eligible Victorians were turned away from essential community services each day.

A survey of almost 1200 organisations found that people were regularly turned away from services such as aged care and health, housing assistance and community legal centres.

Ms Smith said community welfare agencies were running on empty with a \$7 million

shortfall between operating costs and income for service organisations in the year to June 2005.

She said the State Government had offered 2.6 per cent indexation for the next three years but the sector needed about 4.1 per cent "just to keep pace".

Government spokeswoman Sofia Dedes said discussions about funding indexation were ongoing with the welfare sector.

"We have a good working relationship with VCOSS and are confident of achieving a successful outcome," Ms Dedes said.