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Chaos at Cobo: Detroiters turn out for federal help

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Detroit -- Thousands hoping to get applications for federal help on rent and utility bills turned Cobo Center into a chaotic scene today.

They came by foot, wheelchair, bicycle and car. About six left by ambulance after tensions rose and people were trampled, according to a paramedic on the scene. One unfortunate soul got his car booted.

Detroiters were trying to pick up 5,000 federal assistance applications from the city at Cobo because Detroit received nearly \$15.2 million in federal dollars under the Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program, which is for temporary financial assistance and housing services to individuals and families who are homeless, or who would be homeless without this help.

People in wheelchairs and others using canes were being leaned on by people too weak to stand. Emergency medical technicians on the scene said they treated applicants who were injured during the rush to get inside the venue.

That's what happens when a town full of broke people gets a whiff of free money, said Walter Williams, 51, who came before the sun to get an application and a shot at some federal assistance.

"This morning, I seen the curtain pulled back on the misery," he said. "People fighting over a line. People threatening to shoot each other. Is this what we've come to?"

Outside Cobo on Wednesday, some people reportedly were going through the crowd, snatching the necessary applications from those who'd already obtained them. There also was a constant din of screams from people insisting they be let inside.

LaTanya Williams, a 32-year-old Detroit, quickly filled out her form because "people are stealing them."

"I am hoping to get any help that they will give me," she said. "Everybody needs help."

By early morning, the applications had run dry. But some hustlers got the bright idea to photocopy the original and sell the copies for \$20 a pop. They were doing a brisk business. The desperate are easy prey. The white original applications stated clearly on the bottom: "Do not duplicate -- Must Submit Original Application."

By late morning, however, volunteers from the City of Detroit Planning and Development Department were handing out yellow photocopies themselves.

"I'm not even sure the government will accept those applications," said Pam Johnson, a volunteer. "But it's almost like they had to pacify people. There was almost a riot. I mean, they had to call out the gang squad. I saw an elderly woman almost get trampled to death."

John Paul, a 25-year-old Detroit, said the crowd and chaos illustrates the need people have for help.

"We need it," he said of the money. "Whatever they have for me is great."

Detroit Police 2nd Deputy Chief John Roach said 150 officers on the scene got a handle on the situation. "There was some pushing and shoving, and some people have fainted," Roach said. "Given the fact that we have 15,000 people down there, I'm surprised things have been as orderly as they are."

It was difficult to estimate the crowd because lines snaked all through the convention center and outside along the building and down the parking ramp along Cobo Arena to the river. One police officer estimated the crowd at 50,000.

More than 25,000 applications were snapped up in less than three hours Tuesday at Neighborhood City Halls. That day, Karen Dumas, a spokeswoman for Mayor Dave Bing, said some people mistakenly believed they would receive cash on the spot.

"That is totally untrue," she said. "There is a process."

Response had been so great that Detroit police and fire officials considered shutting down the process because of the volume of people.

Kelley Turcotte, a Detroit dishwasher, was near the end of the line around 10:30 a.m. today. The 27-year-old just had a son and said he is only squeaking by on his bills.

"I hope the government sees this and realizes the city needs a lot more help than they are giving," Turcotte said.

Luis Irizarry, 35, drove from Flint for the chance he could get assistance. He later found out only Detroit residents are eligible. He said it was a shock to see this many people in need.

"This is ridiculous," Irizarry said about the thousands who showed up.

Tony Johnson came at 5 a.m. Johnson has not found a job in three years.

"If I could win the mega lottery, I'd be tighty-iddy. I wouldn't be here," Johnson said. "But there's no peace 'cause there ain't no jobs. Everybody's looking for the freebie, the hand-out. They don't count me as unemployed 'cause I ain't drawing a check. It's like I don't even exist. But I do. Look around. There's thousands ... millions of us."

Dan McNamara, president of the Detroit Firefighters Association Local 344, was looking down from his office window across from Cobo.

"This absolutely is representative of the struggling middle class in America," he said. "We've been betrayed by the government, Realtors and those who've got. The promise has been broken."

Detroit News Staff Writer Christine MacDonald contributed to this report.