

## Mom's unexpected death jolts struggling family



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Jesse Summers and his children were dealt with a blow when his wife died in her sleep a few days ago. He is too ill to work and receives only \$750 a month in disability. Jesse is holding Bayleigh, 4; from left, Jesse, 16; Keton, 7; Kyle, 6; Kaitlyn, 18; and Logan, 14. (By Matt Stone, The Courier-Journal) August 11, 2011 / cj/cj

After several years of poverty and homelessness, Jesse Summers said he and his wife, Rebecca, believed they finally were making a better life for themselves and their six children.

The family found a home in south Louisville last year with the help of Volunteers of America, and Rebecca Summers recently found a full-time job with benefits, including health insurance, which she had lacked for the past 18 months.

“She was so excited,” said Jesse Summers, 46, who is disabled by heart disease and unable to work.

But on Monday Rebecca Summers, 40, died unexpectedly in her sleep, devastating her family and leaving her husband to care for six children ages 4 through 18.

“They believe she had a heart attack in her sleep,” her husband said Thursday, at times breaking into tears.

Earlier that evening, the family had been to school orientation for their children. Classes begin Monday in Jefferson County.

Now instead of planning for school, the family is planning a funeral — while unsure of how to pay for it — and the six children face starting school one week after Rebecca Summers’ death.

“They’re managing,” Jesse Summers said of the children. “I don’t know how.”

Jane W. Burks, president of Volunteers of America, which previously had housed the family in its homeless shelter, described the family's situation as "unbelievably sad."

"We get close to all our families and we are particularly close to this family," Burks said. "We are all very devastated."

She said her organization is trying to help the family with food and other necessities. An account also has been established at PNC bank on the family's behalf.

Jesse Summers said any help would be appreciated. At this point, he said, he must borrow money from relatives to buy clothes for the children to wear to Saturday's funeral service.

Until several years ago, the family had been living comfortably in Phoenix, where Rebecca Summers had worked as a nurse and Jesse Summers as a painter,

But in 2007 they moved to Louisville, Jesse Summers' hometown, to be closer to his elderly parents. Once here, his wife discovered her nursing credentials didn't transfer to Kentucky, and Jesse Summers suffered a series of heart attacks that left him unable to work.

When their money ran out, the family sought help from Volunteers of America. The Summerses' efforts to rebuild their lives were featured in a 2008 Courier-Journal story on Christmas Day.

Burks said that since that time the need has continued to grow — even as agencies such as Volunteers of America are seeing more cuts in government funding for services to homeless and low-income families.

"These are really tough times right now," she said. "The Summers family situation makes it very personal."

Jesse Summers said things improved for the family last year after they found a home and he qualified for monthly disability check. His wife helped with income through part-time work as a waitress.

But about three months ago, Rebecca Summers found full-time work at a check-cashing business that provided health coverage after 90 days on the job.

She was thrilled to find a better-paying job with benefits, he said.

Jesse Summers said he is covered by Medicaid because he is disabled, but his wife's part-time income left her ineligible for public assistance. So Rebecca Summers simply went without health care until she found full-time employment.

"She knew she had medical problems — but no insurance," he said.

Her health coverage was to have started Monday, the day she died, Jesse Summer said.

"Today, her insurance cards came in the mail," he said Thursday.

The night she died, Jesse Summers said, his wife said she felt tired and went to lie down for a time after the family returned from school orientation.

Sometime later, he said, one of the children came to report, "I can't wake Mom up!"

Jesse Summers said emergency medical workers tried unsuccessfully to revive her.

"There was nothing they could do," he said.

Summers said his wife was the center of the family's life, managing schedules, meals and the children's needs.

"She was fantastic," he said.

Arrangements are being handled by O.D. White & Sons Funeral Home at 2727 South Third St. Visitation is Friday 2 to 8 p.m. with the funeral Saturday at 12 p.m.

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