



SAG Foundation Funds Becoming Depleted

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By Nicole Kristal

When Brenda Ricci went to the bank to deposit a dollar into her account so her grocery purchase at Trader Joe's wouldn't bounce, she was a little embarrassed. After admitting her feelings to the bank teller, she realized she wasn't alone. He told her lots of people have been making minuscule deposits lately.

Ricci, a SAG member, is in a boat with many actors who had steady television work before the writers' strike. As the strike hits the three-month mark, she has not been able to return to playing Dana Delany's stand-in on *Desperate Housewives*. Instead, Ricci had to take a job at the Gap that sometimes gives her only four hours of work per week. Like many struggling in the entertainment industry, Ricci borrowed money from friends. But once that money ran out, she called the Screen Actors Guild to inquire whether it had any sort of financial-assistance program and learned about the SAG Foundation, an organization designed to provide help to actors in need.

"SAG really kicked in when I needed it because I basically have run out of money," said Ricci, actor of five years and a New York transplant living in L.A.

Unfortunately, Marcia Smith, executive director of the Screen Actors Guild Foundation, said the organization's ability to help actors like Ricci is in danger. "If this rate of giving continues for even another two weeks, we will have really made a huge dent in our budget," said Smith. "If we use up all of our money by February, then we're in trouble."

Smith said the SAG Foundation's Emergency Assistance Program has an annual budget of \$500,000; the organization's fiscal year starts in October. The group gives \$750-\$3,000 grants to actors who qualify for assistance.

Stacey Jackson, emergency assistance administrator at the SAG Foundation, said, "With the strike going on, the number of cases and the number of actors that we need to help or who are seeking our assistance has obviously spiked." Jackson receives about 30 or more calls for assistance per day. Before the strike, that number was five to 10. "Anywhere from 75 to 100 percent of those people are eligible to apply for assistance, so you can imagine not only the workload but the need," Jackson added.

Smith said the Emergency Assistance Program is also in danger because if the Writers Guild of America does not reach a satisfactory agreement with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, SAG might go on strike.

Smith added that actors are also failing to meet the guild's eligibility requirements for pension and health benefits. "Half of the board of the pension and health fund are producers, and the fact that we're not the ones out on strike -- the Writers Guild is on strike -- even though it's causing hardship to our members, they have not relaxed the eligibility requirements," said Smith.

Despite how stretched the SAG Foundation has become, other assistance programs such as the Actors Fund still have ample funds. But Tina Abas, supervising social worker for the Fund, said the number of calls for assistance is still staggering. Since Jan. 11, the organization has received 430 calls from industry professionals seeking financial assistance, and \$210,000 in financial assistance has been doled out to date. "Because we don't know how long the strike is lasting,

we're really working on an individual one-on-one basis to try to help each person figure out their financial strategy," said Abas, who encouraged entertainment professionals in need to call the Fund.

Ricci said both organizations have been integral in keeping her afloat. "SAG and the Actors Fund, actually, between the two of them, paid all my bills and caught me up. It was a blessing that I didn't expect," said Ricci. "It was a godsend. It really was."

Smith encouraged those who can afford to do so to donate to the SAG Foundation. One hundred percent of donations go to members in need, with no money going to administration costs. Unless the strike ends soon or some major A-list celebrity donors step in, the Foundation will be hard-pressed to continue helping actors. "It's a difficult time," she said.

To make a donation or inquire about assistance, contact the SAG Foundation at (323) 549-6708, or visit www.sagfoundation.org. The Actors Fund can be contacted at (323) 933-9244, ext. 55, or online at www.actorsfund.org.

See also [Eight Ways to Stretch Your Dollars: Tips from the Actors Fund](#).

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