

# Homeless offered refuge from winter in church shelters

By Teresa A. Parsons

When a network of Catholic churches in the city of Rochester first opened their basements three years ago to homeless people, no one had time to wonder what was ahead. In fact, it wasn't clear if the shelters would last through the winter. It seemed inevitable that the city or the county or some other "real" social service agency would step in and handle the problem on a more permanent basis.

But years have passed, and the city continues to assert that the homeless are the county's responsibility while the county argues that they belong to the city.

Meanwhile, the church shelters have reopened each winter to serve what one worker has described as a never-ending procession of "shell-shocked vets, no-daylight kids, the mentally ill, drunks mourning lost love affairs — all of society's most vulnerable members."

"We are amazed that it's reached the size it has," said Ann Byrne, who with her husband, John, has coordinated the Blessed Sacrament shelter for three years. "It just answered a real need for us at the time. We wanted to get more involved and beyond that, we really didn't think much about it."

This year, spontaneity has given way to careful planning, and organizers from all three churches — Corpus Christi and St. Bridget's as well — hope that when their shelters reopen next month, a new level of cooperation with "traditional providers" will be evident.

Specifically, Volunteers of America (VOA) has extended its intake hours until 11 p.m. and will link with the church shelters to provide counseling for guests. Reverend Kenneth Fox, director of the Open Door Mission, is also considering extending his hours of operation by opening at 4 p.m. The Salvation Army has agreed to take guests from church shelters when they have beds available.

For shelter volunteers, the actions of those other agencies serve as a powerful reinforcement for their decision to hold to the ideal of hospitality for all guests, regardless of their willingness to change their lifestyles. In the past, traditional providers have been critical of church shelters, describing them as "the path of least resistance" because of their failure to motivate guests to change.

On the other hand, the traditional providers have prompted church volunteers to look for ways to better help those guests who want to improve their lives.

From the beginning, sheltering homeless people has been alternately a rewarding and frustrating line of work. On a bitter cold night, when the doors open and shivering men and women come into a warm basement redolent with the smell of rich soup, there is little reason to question the merits of their efforts. But in the morning as the guests trudge out into the snow in which they will spend the next 15 hours, and each April when the shelters close, volunteers have been struck by the need to find more comprehensive solutions.

Organizers decided that those solutions lay, in part, with the traditional providers even as Salvation Army, VOA and Open Door Mission realized that they needed to cooperate with the church shelters to fill their beds. Last winter, each church shelter was consistently overcrowded, while the other agencies were significantly less than full.

Due to a poor working arrangement and a

lack of communication, church volunteers were seldom able to place their extra guests with any of the traditional providers. Somehow in their three-year history, the church shelters, which were designed to resolve the homeless overflow crisis, had become the primary source of winter shelter.

To many volunteers the situation felt uncomfortably like competing to house homeless people.

Last spring Maurice Tierney, director of Catholic Charities, initiated a study of the shelter network to address the imbalance and to determine whether parish shelters were still needed. Tierney set up a series of meetings, one with each sheltering agency at its own facility. His aim, as he described it, was for the Church to generate "the cooperative spirit which is vital if the providers of emergency shelter are to work together to solve the problem of homelessness."

Parish representatives, including John and Ann Byrne, Sister Barbara Guilino from Blessed Sacrament and Father Bob Werth from St. Bridget's, attended the meetings along with Tierney and Peg Starry, a Jesuit Volunteer and last year's shelter network coordinator.

From those gatherings emerged a group known as the Rochester Task Force on Emergency Housing, organized to improve links between the church shelters and other agencies and to explore more lasting alternatives to the temporary shelters.

To date, proposals have been developed for a "young adult" shelter serving men 18-25 years of age and a daytime drop-in center in addition to the winter emergency shelter.

These proposals respond to reports and evidence of a growing number of homeless youths and the awareness that homeless people need a place where they are welcomed during the day and can find advocates to help them deal with social service agencies.

Although homeless people frequent libraries, Midtown Plaza and other public areas for daytime shelter, they are not necessarily welcome. In fact, a City Court judge is expected to decide soon whether Midtown is public or private. If Judge William Bristol declares that the plaza is private, Midtown Holdings Corporation will have the right to bar any individual from the facility.

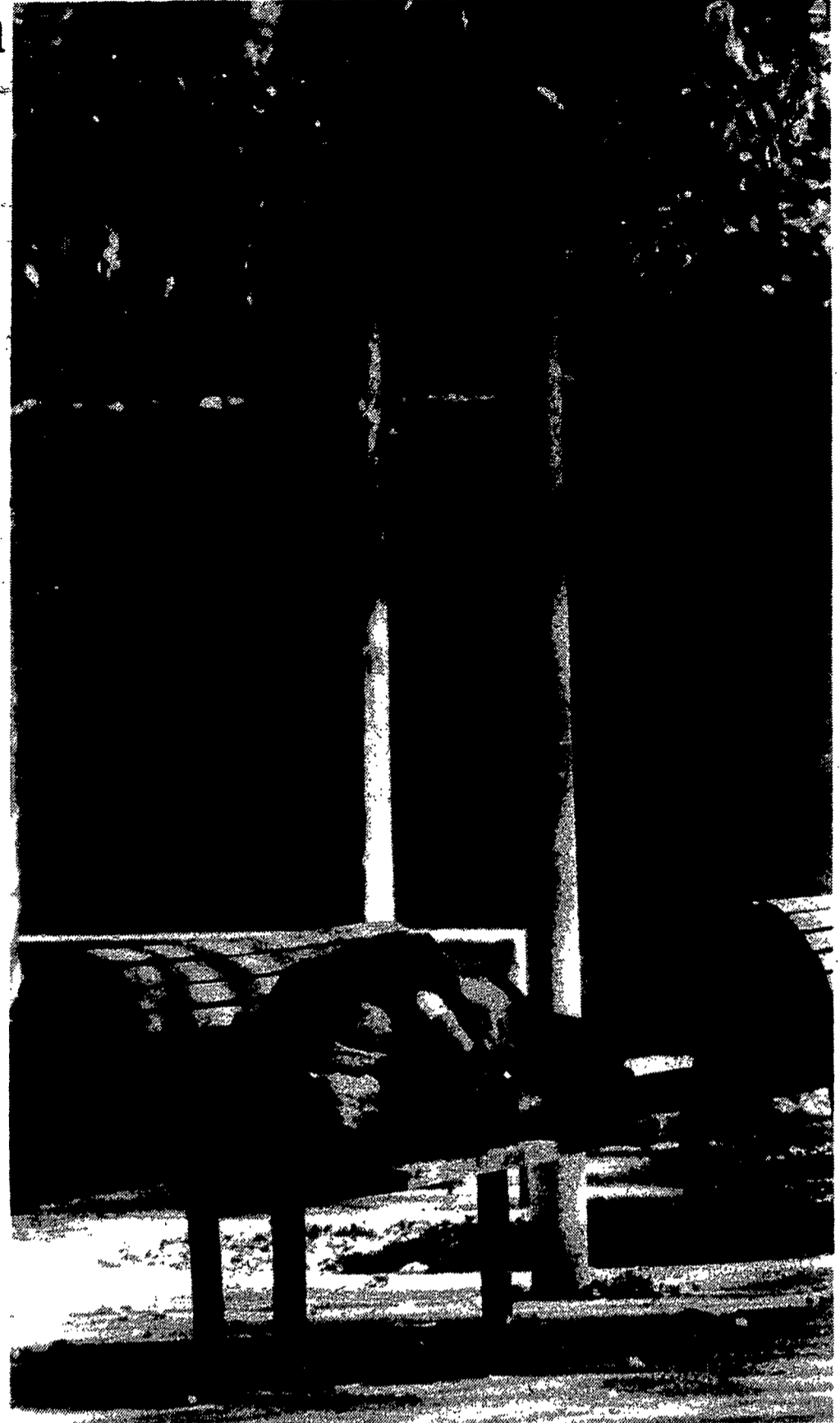
Although the company denies that a private ruling would affect people other than troublemakers, shelter volunteers believe it would spell trouble for those who have nowhere else to go.

Because of a reorganization within the Office of Social Ministry, Tierney's responsibilities have broadened to include the entire diocese, and he is no longer working with the task force. Instead, the new Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry is represented on the task force by Bill Privett, the office's director for Catholic Charities/human services. Catherine Wobus, casework director for Catholic Family Center, has also been working with the task force.

"I feel good that the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry has stepped in," Ann Byrne said. "Many of the volunteers were unaware that the diocese supported us in any way."

Since the network began, volunteers have found the nature of diocesan support for

continued on Page 8



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

A park bench may suffice for now, but cold weather will soon drive this man and many others to seek indoor shelter.

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