

Parish shelters plan to reopen; task force to study homeless

By Teresa A. Parsons

On November 16, three Rochester parishes will open their basements to the homeless for the fifth consecutive winter.

Each night until mid-April, emergency shelters at Corpus Christi, Blessed Sacrament and St. Bridget's churches will offer hospitality, hot meals and warm beds to as many as 33 people, seven days a week.

Because they realize that homelessness doesn't disappear with bad weather, organizers of the Rochester Parish Emergency Shelter Network acknowledge that their seasonal response is no more than a Band-Aid solution to the problem.

And they continue to seek long-range solutions to the needs of Rochester's homeless population. But their efforts are dogged by the fact that some agencies' shelter beds remain empty while people sleep in the streets.

To try and determine why those beds are empty and who isn't being served by existing programs, a task force headed by the Mental Health Association is seeking support for a new study on homelessness in Rochester.

Members of the task force, which has been meeting since April, include representatives from urban parishes and the parish shelter network, the diocese, the United Way, the Salvation Army, city and county government and the Rochester Psychiatric Center.

Conducted by the Center for Governmental Research, the study would be aimed at finding out how many people in Rochester are homeless, who they are, and where gaps exist in services. Responses to homelessness in other cities would be examined. The study would also try to project developments in the homeless population and recommend actions to deal with those developments.

"The traditional view of the man sleeping on the park bench may no longer be representative (of homeless persons)," said Barbara Wagner, director of social services for the Salvation Army and a task force member.

She noted, for instance, that the few shelters that accept women and children are always full. Genesis House, a young-adult shelter operated by the Salvation Army, also has a constant waiting list.

On the other hand, shelter and treatment programs for homeless men offered year-round by the Volunteers of America and the Salvation Army are not being used to capacity, particularly during the winter when the parish shelters open.

Representatives of both agencies have suggested that the parish shelters' open-door

policy provides an easy alternative for homeless persons, particularly alcoholics, who might otherwise submit to more structured programs.

Parish shelter workers counter that an alternative is needed for those homeless people who don't or won't fit into formal programs.

"We have limits and rules, but we probably have been a little weak in steering people into programs," said Paul Shuh, a volunteer at St. Bridget's shelter. "On the other hand, some of our guests are street people who may not want to change their lives. . . . Is it right to let them freeze to death?"

Although Barbara Wagner agreed that the church shelters are needed, she fears that they are seen as solving the homeless problem.

"I don't think we should look at those as the answer, exclusive of anything else," she said. "There will always be a population that needs 'three hots and a cot,' but we should not be making that our primary emphasis. We need a continuum of services, from the so-called flophouse to transitional and supportive living situations for all populations."

A clearer picture of which services are most seriously lacking should emerge once the study is completed in six to eight months. Before it begins, however, the Mental health task force must come up with almost \$15,000 to pay for it. So far, City Councilwomen Lois Geiss, Maxine Childress-Brown and Joan Hensler have indicated that they would support a \$5,000 city grant to help pay for the study. Task force members are also looking to churches of various denominations for additional funds.

Parish shelter coordinators hope that the study will confirm the need for a permanent shelter that would combine the philosophy and volunteer involvement of the parishes with the resources and expertise of social-service agencies and government.

"I would hope for a permanent facility that will not only serve the homeless during the winter, but also the summer months and during the day as well as during the night," said John Byrne, coordinator of Blessed Sacrament shelter. "But it can't be just another agency."

Corpus Christi shelter worker Betty Schmitt agreed. "We are not an agency, we are ministry, and we try to accept people with their choices as they are, non-institutionally and non-judgmentally," she explained.

Corpus Christi has moved its emergency shelter this year from the church basement to 100 N. Union St., where the parish purchased a large double house and a smaller carriage house. The facility has been named Dimitri House in memory of a homeless man who was



Corpus Christi's health advocate for the homeless, Elizabeth Quinlan, offers healthy advice to Steve Godfrey and other guests who visit Dimitri House's new drop-in center, open twice a week.

struck by a car and killed on Monroe Avenue last year.

The main building will eventually become a year-round, transitional shelter with apartments for three to six homeless men, who will share the house with staff members and their families, most of whom have already moved in. Organizers hope that Dimitri House's first apartment will be ready for occupants by mid-winter, according to Christine Garrison, a resident staff member.

The emergency shelter will be located at the carriage house, where the parish is already operating its food-distribution program as well as a new drop-in center on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.

"We expect to receive and respond to that part of society the same way we have in the past, in love and in dignity," said Schmitt.

Throughout the summer, Corpus Christi's health advocate for the homeless, Elizabeth Quinlan, has continued to offer a free health clinic at the Volunteers of America shelter every Wednesday morning. In early September, a resident in psychiatry joined the clinic's team of volunteer doctors and nurses.

Generally, the team treats six to eight people each week for conditions ranging from hypertension to cuts and scrapes. So far, Quinlan

said, nearly 80 percent of the patients have complied with doctor's orders, from taking medication to showing up for follow-up appointments. When and if she can find more funding, Quinlan hopes to offer the clinic at an additional site this year.

While Corpus Christi has been expanding programs, coordinators at Blessed Sacrament and St. Bridget's have been trying to increase community awareness of the parish shelter network by involving more churches in their programs.

"It's necessary for this to become a community project, rather than a church project," said John Byrne. "It seems like the best way for us to reach out in the community is through the churches."

Coordinators at both Blessed Sacrament and St. Bridget's have also considered closing their shelters after this winter.

"To say that this would be our last year might put some pressure on the powers that be to look for a permanent facility," Shuh explained. "Overall, if there was a need for us to open a shelter in the basement next year, I can't see us saying no. I just think we have to push for a permanent shelter."

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Homelessness assumes the face of a friend for one local family

Marty and Barb Moynihan had no idea what they were getting into when they invited a man from Blessed Sacrament Church's homeless shelter to dinner last November.

They're not sure how it happened, but now, almost a year later, he's become a part of their family.

For the past several years, the Moynihans, who belong to St. John the Evangelist, Humboldt Street, have harbored a latent desire to volunteer for the parish shelter network.

Last winter, they signed up for an overnight shift at Blessed Sacrament's shelter. Looking back, Marty remembered how amazed and appalled he was at the grimness of the guests' lives.

"One of the first things that hit me was how unfortunate these people were," he said. "They don't have a thing. It really hit me that I know where I'll be going every night, but there they are, wandering from place to place."

When their future friend (whom the Moynihans prefer to identify only as Jim) first came to the shelter, he was nasty and hostile, Barb recalled. For most of the winter, he refused to eat with the other guests, but went straight to bed. Jim seethed visibly, and sometimes verbally, with bitterness.

"I didn't like him, and I don't think he liked me either," she said. "I'm a basic coward, so the chances of me becoming friends with someone like him were about one in a million."

Then one freezing Saturday, Barb saw him downtown, blue with cold and dressed in torn, summerweight clothes. He asked for a cigarette. She offered to buy him a cup of coffee, but he said he was too embarrassed to sit with her. She said that was ridiculous and bought him breakfast.

From that time on, Jim trusted her, and she discovered that she liked him after all. "I think that more than anything, he just wanted someone to talk to him and not treat him like a bum," Barb said. "I don't care what anybody does in their life, they don't deserve to live like that."

She and Marty bought him winter clothes. Then, near Thanksgiving, they invited him to their home for dinner.

Naturally, they had apprehensions — or at least Marty did. "I had no idea what we were getting into," he said. "It was scary."

Their guest seemed equally nervous. "He was so polite, it was almost funny," Barb said. "He barely said a word."

Throughout the winter, the Moynihans continued to invite Jim to their home nearly once a week. He would shower and shave, help around the house, watch television and play games with the Moynihans' children, 11-year-old Stephen and 12-year-old Kari.

The family discovered that he was gentle but hot-tempered, kind, intelligent, hardworking and skilled at everything from plumbing to carpentry and wallpapering. He was also incredibly lonely.

Sometimes, Jim told them, he wouldn't talk to another human being from one visit to the next.

Few of the Moynihans' friends and acquaintances openly disapproved of the relationship. "I'm sure some people thought we were screwing and that he was going to take us for a ride," Marty said.

But to their knowledge, Jim has never lied to them. Many times, they have left him alone in their home, but he has never taken anything.

Nor has he taken advantage of them. "Only when he's desperate will he ask for anything," Barb said. "He doesn't want to take charity."

Still, the Moynihans have helped him find apartments and odd jobs. They even gave him an old car in return for his help around their house.

But they haven't done all the giving. Jim has revealed to them a side of life they never imagined. "He took away my preconceived notions of what these guys are all about. I thought everybody on the streets was an alcoholic, but that wasn't the case," Barb said.

Because homeless people look dirty, she added, passers-by think they might be dangerous.

"They (homeless people) are very sensitive to the fact that people shy away from them because of their appearance," she said.

Above all, the Moynihans have learned that they can neither buy Jim a better life nor force him to find one.

"I got into this full of idealism that if we got him cleaned up and got him work, he'd be fine," Barb said. "It hasn't worked that way. He's not a paper doll you can cut out and dress up."

Gradually, he has grown less bitter and angry. After months of encouragement, he even agreed to visit the dentist.

But Jim hasn't conquered all his problems. The Moynihans know that he needs counseling, but he refuses to go out of fear that someone will label him "crazy."

Volunteer drought causes shelter to close

This winter, there will be a dozen fewer beds for homeless men in Rochester.

Because of a shortage of staff members, St. Joseph's House of Hospitality will open a shelter on a very limited basis, if at all.

"Assuming all things remain as they are, we will try to open a shelter in January and February," said Marty Lynch, one of three remaining staff members. "But it is possible that even that would be too much."

The shelter, which opened in 1981, has offered much more than just 12 beds. Its philosophy has combined Catholic Worker ideals with practical support to help guests make the transition from life on the streets.

"It's been a real nice thing to offer folks, especially since there aren't a lot of other places," Larch said. "It's unfortunate, but you've got to do what you've got to do."

Since the days of the Great Depression, St. Joseph's has offered meals, clothing and hospitality to the city's poor at its 402 South Ave. location. Staff members plan to continue serving meals this year as usual.

In order to open the shelter, Larch said, St. Joseph's would need at least one and possibly two more full-time staff members.

"We have everything we need except for staff," added board member Beth McCarren.