

Foundation offers rural families avenue to decent housing

By Teresa A. Parsons
 Ever since she moved to Magic Hollow from Pittsford four years ago, Dorothy Henlin has managed on her own.

Each winter, she has chopped and hauled and stacked wood to heat her small house on a hillside overlook the Yates County village of Middlesex.

But this year, she faced a choice between moving or freezing. Physically, she is no longer up to heavy chores. Nor could she afford to install a furnace.

Henlin turned to the Keuka Housing Council, which in turn referred her to the Rural Housing Office of the Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation.

Margaret Hinton, the office's rural-housing specialist, helped Henlin apply for funds from the Home Energy Assistance Program and Lend-A-Hand, a program of the Gannett Foundation. As a result, Henlin faces the winter armed with a small fuel-oil furnace.

"It's been a pure joy living here," she told Hinton. "If you weren't there, where would I be?"

The Rural Housing Office sits virtually on the sidewalk in downtown Rushville, so everyone in town knows where it is. But after three years, word is still spreading about exactly what the office does.

Which is a shame, because chances are that a great number of the residents of Rushville and similar towns could use the kind of help Hinton and her co-workers offer.

At the Rural Housing Office, people can find expertise and assistance to repair, rehabilitate, update or preserve homes they already own. Staff members can help clients apply for grants and loans to purchase or build new homes. They also cooperate with other housing agencies in a 13-county area that develop and manage low- and middle-income housing. In addition, they offer seminars and workshops to all kinds of groups on home ownership, grant writing and other topics.

In addition to Hinton, the Rural Housing Office staff includes Denise O'Connor, a part-time administrative assistant, and Jim Everett, a part-time rehabilitation specialist. Everett evaluates buildings, helps families "prioritize their emergencies," oversees bids, and monitors

actual repairs.

"A lot of families don't know what they need," Hinton said. "They may submit for chimney repair when they really need a furnace."

New windows, a roof, furnace or a sewer system barely scratch the surface of repairs needed to many rural homes. "It's frustrating doing some of these small things to houses that are literally falling down," Hinton said. "But a lot of times, we just don't have the money to do what needs to be done."

Regardless of how dilapidated their homes are, some families refuse to move. The motivation is pride for some. Others, particularly senior citizens, want to stay for sentimental reasons. Still others don't realize that anything better is within their grasp. "A lot of people grew up like that," Hinton said. "They don't realize the services that are there."

Housing may also be only part of a morass of problems rural families face. Unemployment is high in most rural areas, and so is the incidence of problems that accompany it — hunger, family conflicts, poor health.

Many rural families double up in inadequate quarters. Hinton recalled one family of eight members who lived in a single mobile home without an emergency exit.

Other families heat their mobile homes with kerosene heaters or woodstoves that aren't adequately ventilated. Last winter, Hinton learned, one family burned their furniture for heat.

Rural people in general are difficult to help, in part because of their isolation, but also because of pride.

They seldom walk into the Rural Housing Office and ask for assistance. More often, Hinton receives referrals from friends, relatives, other agencies or churches. "Unless they have a rapport with someone, they won't come," she said. "A lot of people are already on welfare, and they don't want to go to one more agency."

She is not sure why so much rural housing is so poor. Although there has never been a surplus of decent housing for low- or middle-income families in the state's rural areas, the current situation has reached a crisis point.

One factor has been the steady cutback in federal programs that fund housing. For example, the Federal Housing Authority,



Susan Kost
 With help from Rural Housing Specialist Margaret Hinton (left) and the Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation, Dorothy Henlin was able to purchase the furnace that

will heat her Yates County home this winter, which offers a variety of housing loan programs, has been progressively bogged down by staff and budget cuts for as long as the foundation has been established. "It's a wonderful program," said Allyn Smith, the Bishop Sheen foundation's executive director. "But they aren't getting the money out to people."

As a result, each year New York state returns a portion of the funds allotted to it, she added.

Nor is housing a priority for most funding organizations. "Foundations are reluctant to give amounts to housing that they would easily give for food," Smith said.

"We have the soft services. But people need homes, and they need help to fix up their homes. And housing repair is expensive."

By passing along her direct experience with rural housing, Hinton helps the Bishop Sheen foundation's advocacy committee keep hous-

ing issues before government officials and legislators at all levels.

"We have been pushing the state to look at rural housing and to look toward designing and facilitating programs that meet those needs," Smith said. New state programs — such as the Housing Trust Fund and Homeless Housing Assistance Program (HHAP) — are the result of lobbying by housing agencies across the state, including the Bishop Sheen Foundation.

Concern about the lack of decent and affordable housing for low- and middle-income families in the Rochester area was what prompted the late Bishop Fulton J. Sheen to establish the foundation in 1968. In 1981, the Roman Catholic organization merged with a similar operation run by the Episcopal Diocese of Rochester.

Continued on Page 12

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