

State funds two projects for women

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Liberty Manor will house up to 15 women 18 years or older and five preschool children for as long as six months. Applicants, who will be screened by Restart, must be physically "detoxed," but will still face the task of overcoming their psychological and emotional dependencies.

Although the proportion of male and female substance abusers are estimated to be about equal, fewer women seek treatment. "Substance abuse is still a greater shame for women," Elling explained. "Those women with children are also afraid of losing them to the foster care system — which is a very real possibility."

To help alleviate that fear, women will be able to keep very young children with them as long as they are capable of caring for them.

Residents' daily schedules will be heavily structured. Because a lack of education often keeps women from moving beyond the cycle of drug addiction, Liberty Manor will offer a tutoring program to help residents receive their high school equivalency degrees.

Eventually, an addict's entire life revolves around drugs. Women addicts tend to become housebound, isolated and fearful. In response, Liberty Manor residents will plan outings to help rebuild their confidence. An arrangement with the Metro YMCA will allow them to take part in a fitness plan. They will also spend several hours each week on volunteer work in the community. Volunteer work is also part of a plan to allow

women to discover their job skills and preferences.

Liberty Manor will also offer residents individual and group therapy. To maintain a home-like atmosphere, however, program planners decided to send women to Restart offices on the city's south side for treatment.

"We had a high, high priority that this at least look like a home," Elling said. "We want it to be a nice place that will raise their self-esteem."

Nearly 20 people — including live-in counselors, a caseworker, house manager, therapy aides and volunteers — will staff Liberty Manor 24 hours a day. Round-the-clock supervision is important, Elling explained, because people coming off of drugs often suffer from sleep disturbances. "Many of these women are also used to a lifestyle of being up at night," she added.

Rather than opposing the program, many neighbors have actually supported it. "(Community organization) 14621 has been very, very active in taking a strong stance against drugs. They were very helpful to us," Elling said. "Except for one man, nobody stood against us at city council."

Parishioners at Our Lady of Perpetual Help have also grown accustomed to a new use for their parish convent. Initially, some were concerned, according to Father Neil Miller, pastor. But after several open meetings, including one with Restart administrators, the parish council voted to allow the agency to lease the convent.

"I think people are taking a whole new look at the drug situation and realizing we need to do something about it," Father Miller said. "One thing that has helped has been that the people have been kept apprised of what's going on at every step... I feel that they are accepting it quite well."

Elling believes the parish location will be an important advantage to Liberty Manor's residents. "When you're talking about substance abuse, a big part of getting better is looking at what spirituality means to the individual," she said.

Restart does not intend Liberty Manor to

offer emergency shelter to women or children. On the contrary, its admission policy will be both personalized and selective. Elling plans to encourage applicants to visit first, to share a meal and talk with residents. "I foresee that it could take up to two weeks to get in here," she said.

Sister Eileen Conheady, on the other hand, plans a shelter for the homeless woman who shows up at 9 p.m. with no place to go.

Some are burned out of their homes, or are driven out of their apartments by rent increases. Others are left homeless after the breakup of marriages or relationships.

Unlike homeless men, women are seldom visible on the streets. Instead, they depend on the company of friends. "There's a great floating society of women that live with friends — at least until they have a fight and get kicked out," Sister Eileen explained.

Only 39 emergency and 56 transitional shelter beds are available to women in Monroe County. The waiting period for many of those beds is two or three weeks.

While they wait for an opening, women may receive emergency funds from the Department of Social Services for lodging at a local motel.

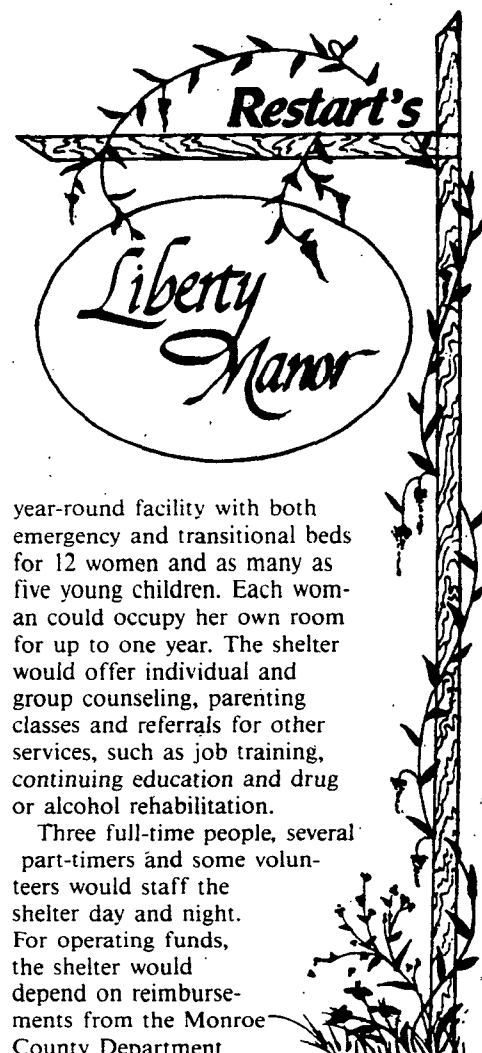
Or they might find a vacancy in one of the city's emergency shelters that accept women. Beginning last winter, the Rochester Parish Shelter Network set aside three emergency beds for women. Many are afraid to stay at shelters occupied mostly by men. Nevertheless, more than two dozen women stayed at Blessed Sacrament's shelter during the course of the winter.

Although they believed the need for a women's emergency shelter was apparent, neither Sister Eileen nor Catherine Wobus, Catholic Family Center casework director, were optimistic about their chances for funding it in mid-June of last year. Proposals for the state's Homeless Housing Assistance Program (HHAP) were due by July 1, and they still needed a location, an architectural study, projected budget, and plans for staffing and services.

"Well Sister, I think we ought to try it," Wobus finally told Sister Eileen.

After more than three months of phone calls and sweaty palms, they were notified last month by state officials that their proposal would be funded.

The HHAP money will pay to purchase and renovate a building for use as a



year-round facility with both emergency and transitional beds for 12 women and as many as five young children. Each woman could occupy her own room for up to one year. The shelter would offer individual and group counseling, parenting classes and referrals for other services, such as job training, continuing education and drug or alcohol rehabilitation.

Three full-time people, several part-timers and some volunteers would staff the shelter day and night. For operating funds, the shelter would depend on reimbursements from the Monroe County Department of Social Services and donations.

"We would offer women a time to get the skills they need for independent living if that's why they're homeless," Sister Eileen said. "We realize the power each woman has within herself to make positive life choices. That's different from if you look at someone as very needy and you have to fill them up. Actually, they are the ones with the power and strength."

Major details, including the exact amount the state will provide and the location for the shelter, have yet to be finalized. But the state's approval is a giant step.

"If all goes well, we would hope to take in women beginning in the summer of 1987," Sister Eileen said.

"It's a miracle it ever happened. We were just in the right place at the right time," she added. "I don't think I would have had the courage to do it without Catherine Wobus. She kept encouraging me and supporting me, always saying 'I think we have a chance.'"

'There's a great floating society of women that live with friends — at least until they have a fight and get kicked out.'

Sister Eileen Conheady, SSJ shelter director

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