

Local News

Wayne County fire demonstrates lack of decent housing

By Teresa A. Parsons

The fire that claimed the lives of three Wayne County children earlier this month could easily be repeated in the homes of dozens of other area families, says a local outreach worker.

The Rev. Don Robinson, executive director of the Wayne County Rural Ministry Come-Unity Center, fears that such a tragedy may well happen again unless members of the community begin working together to improve housing conditions.

"I know of a number of families that the same thing could happen to right now," Robinson said. "(Substandard housing) is a running sore that this community has to deal with."

Conditions in the Williamson house trailer where three of Rickey and Betty Holloway's seven children died in an October 13 fire were unfortunately all too typical, Robinson said. The two-bedroom wooden-frame mobile home was already far too small for a family of nine, and because of a leaky roof, the bedrooms were uninhabitable. Since the furnace was broken, Betty Holloway was forced to use a kerosene heater, which she was refilling on the Tuesday evening when the fuel caught fire.

By the time firemen arrived, the trailer was blazing. Betty and four daughters managed to escape, but three of the Holloway children — Rickey, 8, Stacey, 6, and Christopher, 2 — remained inside.

The Holloway children's deaths have already prompted donations of food, money, clothing, and services from throughout the community and beyond.

Last Wednesday, the Holloways moved into a Williamson house owned by St. Mary of the Lake Parish in Ontario. Members of the parish's social ministry committee have offered to let the family stay in the apartment rent-free until they are able to find a new home.

The parish uses part of the house for catechism classes, but the building also contains a furnished three-bedroom apartment, which was set up to house a family of Vietnamese refugees. The apartment was recently left vacant when the Vietnamese family joined relatives in California.

Several agencies — including Habitat for Humanity, and Community Action and Self Help (CASH) — have meanwhile offered to cooperate in building the Holloways a new home.

An anonymous donor has also offered another house if a site can be found for it. Since the Holloways have already been given shelter, Robinson said that Come-Unity Center would try to raise funds to move the house to land in Sodus, where it could be used for other families encountering similar emergencies.



Along with her husband and four surviving daughters, Betty Holloway has found refuge in a Williamson house owned by St. Mary of the Lake Parish in Ontario. Three of the Holloways' children died in a trailer fire earlier this month.

The outpouring of help for the Holloways is ironic in contrast to the lack of success the family met with in their efforts to find safer housing before the fire.

Robinson said that his interfaith agency, which provides food, clothing and referrals, had tried unsuccessfully to help the Holloways ever since they arrived from Florida last year. "The Saturday before the fire, Betty (Holloway) was here in the office volunteering and looking for a better place," he said. "We saw a lot of landlords who just couldn't cope with all their children.

"Had we found them a place, maybe this disaster would have been avoided," he added. "But maybe out of the ashes of this, we can find help

for them and others like them?" Robinson has encountered more than a few families in circumstances similar to the Holloways, in part because of the scarcity of well-paying jobs in the area, and also because of a lack of decent rental housing.

Government guidelines suggest that "comfortable, affordable" rental housing should comprise at least 10 percent of a county's available housing stock, according to Laurie Nan-

zer, the Come-Unity Center's assistant director. In Wayne County, only one-half of 1 percent of all housing is available for rent, and much of it is substandard, she observed.

Agricultural workers in particular have struggled with the high cost of housing during the past several years, because produce prices have been low and work scarce. Nanzer

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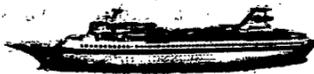
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