

Features

Emergency shelters face long-term future

By Lee Strong

As Rochester's four church-operated shelters began their sixth winter of operation last week, shelter staffs and diocesan officials acknowledged that what had begun as a temporary response to homelessness has evolved into a permanent ministry. Their struggle to expand services has also convinced shelter workers that without a permanent facility, efforts to aid Rochester's homeless population will be hopelessly inadequate.

"Creating a permanent shelter is the direction we need to go in," said William H. Privett, director of Catholic Charities for the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry, and a member of the Parish Emergency Shelter Network, which encompasses shelters at Blessed Sacrament, Corpus Christi and St. Bridget's. "only when we have such a facility can we begin to adequately deal with the problem."

Privett's claims are backed by the preliminary results of a study made of Rochester's homeless for the Mental Health Association by the Center for Government Research. The study, conducted last March 15 to April 1 in Rochester's shelters, revealed that the people in the shelters had been without medical services for long periods of time, and that the lack of activities and places to go during the day lead to drinking, drugs and other problems.

Ideally, Privett explained, a permanent facility would offer not only temporary shelter, but also daytime activities and a variety of medical and counseling services. In addition, the facility would provide single-occupancy apartments into which the homeless could move. The need for such apartments is pointed out by the fact that Rochester's shelter crises began in the early 1980s in large part because the YMCA and YWCA stopped providing low-cost single occupancy rooms, and the Edison Hotel and the Triangle Center were destroyed by urban renewal.

Centralizing shelter activities would also eliminate duplication of services, and would allow the parish shelters to close. "The parishes opened the shelters with a five-year commitment, and this is now the sixth year," Privett observed. "They need the space (they've been using for shelters) back."

In an earlier attempt to create a permanent daytime site, the network opened a drop-in center at St. Martin's Soup Kitchen at Mount Carmel Parish two years ago. The center failed because its location was too distant and unfamiliar to many of the homeless, revealing to network leaders that any permanent facility would have to be located near downtown and on a bus route.

At this point, the major roadblock to creating a permanent facility is finding and acquiring a site. State and federal money is available only for financing renovations to currently owned buildings and operating shelters, not for purchasing them. Last spring, for example,

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Although the network will receive \$21,400 through a \$500 million congressional appropriation bill, this money also is restricted in use. Divided among the three parish shelters — Blessed Sacrament, \$6,600; Corpus Christi, \$12,000; and St. Bridget's, \$2,800 — these funds can be used only for renovations and operating expenses of existing shelters.

Other institutions received larger portions of the \$144,000 designated for Rochester because they needed more extensive renovations than the three parish shelters required. Sojourner House alone, for example, will receive \$30,000 because of its recent fire.

Next year, network leaders hope to submit a grant proposal to New York state's Homeless Housing and Assistance Program — which funded the apartment conversion project at Mount Carmel School — if a site is found. Once the building is located, and funding approved, renovations will take a year to 18 months.

While waiting for the establishment of a permanent facility — and for greater government involvement in caring for the homeless — the parish shelters have struggled over the years to maintain and expand their services, recognizing that the needs of the homeless extend beyond just a warm bed at night.

For example, all three shelters now offer some sort of counseling services. Linda Rosier and Jim Parsons, directors of St. Bridget's and Blessed Sacrament's shelters respectively, have arranged for social workers to visit their shelters at least one day a week. These social workers will help homeless people deal with the social-welfare system and overcome some of the problems that prevented them from doing so before — illiteracy, shame because of their appearance, insensitive caseworkers, and

so on. Meanwhile, Corpus Christi's Dimitri House, which houses the parish' food and shelter program, has a social worker and a health care worker on staff providing more extensive services than the other two shelters can do at this time.

In addition, the County of Monroe's Department of Social Services has expanded the hours of its Adult Protective Services. Adult-Protective counselors will now be on call until midnight, and will be able to provide follow-up work with the homeless during the day when social service agencies are open. The shelter staffs will make use of this service whenever they can.

The shelters' staffs have also begun to try to find or create longer-term housing for the homeless, believing that with some stability in their lives, some homeless individuals might then be able to resolve some of their other problems. Neither St. Bridget's nor Blessed Sacrament is equipped to offer extensive long-term housing, but data compiled by the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry during the 1986/87 winter season revealed that the average length of stay at both shelters increased last year. Increased contact with their guests and counseling available at St. Bridget's last year enabled shelter workers there to help two homeless individuals establish apartments. With longer stays and the availability of counseling at both shelters this year, staff members hope to be able to help other homeless individuals move into apartments this winter.

Corpus Christi's shelter program will go a step further. Volunteers are currently renovating two apartments to house five to eight people beginning next spring. These individuals — chosen from among the shelter's winter guests — will live in the apartments for a set period of time, assuming responsibility for chores within the apartments. They will also receive counseling, and assistance in finding work, getting public assistance and setting up apartments of their own.

Although not a member of the shelter network, St. Joseph's House of Hospitality will resume its shelter program after a volunteer shortage prevented its opening last year. The St. Joseph's program will also provide longer-term care, housing the same five individuals for the entire winter — and perhaps beyond. Each of the men will receive his own room and storage area to help give him a sense of dignity and belonging. "Our goal," said shelter coordinator Lisa Kowalewski, "is to make it a home, not just a shelter. (We want it to be) a place where they can leave their things and not worry about them."

"What we're trying to do in the shelters," explained John Schmitt, coordinator of Corpus Christi's shelter, "is to give the homeless a sense of self-worth and dignity. Out on the streets they have no power or wealth, so in our society they have no worth."

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Corpus Christi shelter

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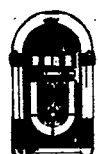
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