

Features

Agencies find similar dilemmas among urban, rural poor

By Lee Strong

Although they work with different populations, the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry (FLOSM) and the Division of Urban Services assist families with many of the same difficulties. Sudden or serious illness, unemployment, insufficient income and single parenthood are problems both rural and urban families must face. Both offices help to meet the needs of these families, with support from the Courier Journal/Catholic Charities Christmas Fund.

The Division of Urban Services addresses the needs of the poor in the city of Rochester's 33 parishes. Each of the parishes — or institutions like the Sisters of Mercy's House of Mercy that serve the urban poor — submit one case for inclusion on the list of 100 Neediest Cases, though not all parishes do. This year, 17 of the neediest cases on the list are from Urban Services.

Many of the cases are submitted because they have problems typical of those other families face, according to Father John Mulligan, director of Urban Services for the diocese of Rochester. If, for example, a parish has a number of single-parent households, parish staff might submit to the Christmas Fund the story

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of a single-parent family dealing with problems several other parish families also face.

One advantage of having parish staff members choose cases is that they know the people and their needs on a personal level, Father Mulligan remarked. Last winter, for example, one parish staff noticed that a single mother with a large family had only one coat — a cheap terry cloth one — that she wore even in the coldest weather. They also knew she spent any extra money she had on the children. Using Christmas Fund money, the staff bought her a winter coat.

In most of the parishes, Christmas Fund money is used to fill such practical needs as rent payments or clothing. Father Mulligan

noted. He also pointed out that often the Christmas fund money supplements aid already being provided — whether from the Department of Social Services or such parish ministries as food cupboards or clothing-distribution programs. In conjunction with clothing programs, for example, fund money is used to buy underwear, socks or unusually sized clothing.

FLOSM also submits cases typifying the needs of many families in the five-county region the office serves, according to Meg Byrne, the office's Catholic Charities director. These cases are discovered through such FLOSM outreach services as its older worker employment, food distribution or emergency assistance

programs.

Although both urban and rural families face similar situations, Byrne pointed out that rural families have an additional problem. "It's important to understand about the rural nature," she remarked. "On top of all the other problems, the greatest problem is isolation. Even though some social services are available, the people who need them often can't get to them." Isolation — and the lack of adequate public transportation — means that most of the work of the Geneva-based office is done on an outreach basis, she added.

FLOSM uses the Christmas Fund money to help people to survive until they find long-term solutions, Byrne said. Many of the people the office serves are working poor — people who make too much to be on public assistance but not enough to make ends meet. Another group FLOSM assists are migrant families who have chosen to remain in New York to stabilize their lives. In previous years, money from the Christmas Fund has helped these families survive while the parents attempt to find permanent employment.

"The importance of the Christmas Fund is that it allows us to do some things we wouldn't otherwise be able to do," Byrne concluded.

51 A rural Livingston County family of seven has been struggling to make ends meet. The father is disabled and unable to work. The mother recently lost her nurse's aide position. Since last spring, their teenage daughter has been hospitalized in the city, and the family recently was evicted from its home. The meager family income never seems to stretch quite far enough to cover food, clothing, heating, travel costs to and from the hospital, incidental hospital expenses not covered by Medicaid and the innumerable other expenses generated by five lively young children.

52 P.J. is a teenage mother of one-year-old twins, a boy and girl. The first year of life with them has been quite difficult, especially since she lacked the skills and experience needed for daily child care. In addition, she had to grapple with the problems of housing

and independent living. These difficulties have not deterred P.J. from providing the best possible care and love for her babies. This is evident in their health and positive interaction with her and others. P.J. is attempting to improve their life situation by getting a GED and plans to pursue college education. Like any parent, P.J. wants to delight her babies with toys this Christmas. She also needs baby clothing, high chairs and a walker.

53 B.W., a mother of a three-year-old daughter, is pregnant with her second child. Life for her has been an endless string of deprivation and stressful moments. Several months ago, she lost a baby through miscarriage. In spite of the formidable difficulties that confront her, B.W. is determined to raise and nurture her child in a loving environment. B.W. hopes to make this Christmas special for her daughter with gifts of toys and clothes. She also needs clothing and furniture for the unborn baby.

54 Mrs. R. D. was one of the boat people who arrived from Haiti in 1980. As a

farm worker with six children, she had no formal education and was unable to find gainful employment. In her late 40s at the time of her arrival, she also had many medical problems including diabetes, which made employment even more difficult. Mrs. R.D. speaks very little English, but recently she found work and was extremely happy at her new job. Unfortunately, she was laid off after only two months.

55 The J. family was burned out of their home the day after Thanksgiving. Besides losing their home, they lost all their possessions and are without clothes. Mr. J. is an asthmatic and is unable to work. Mrs. J. is a homemaker who cares for their 15-year-old daughter, 13-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter. Neighbors have taken them in, but they need food. The insurance will help toward a new home, but they will have to start furnishing from scratch. Any donation will be appreciated.

56 Mrs. P. is a young mother with five children to raise alone. She is receiving public assistance and finds it very difficult to provide adequately for the children. She has experienced a number of mishaps and finds it hard at times to cope. She would be grateful for any donations toward her family for Christmas.

57 Mrs. T. L. is a widow with five children. Her husband died at the refugee camp

in Thailand. She arrived in the United States in July, 1982, and was resettled in Maine. She migrated to Rochester in August, 1985. She was a weaver in Laos, but has never worked in the United States. She has a handicapped child and many medical problems herself, and is unable to seek employment at this time. However, she is attending English classes so that in the future she may be able to find employment.

58 Mr. and Mrs. C. S., a young Laotian couple expecting their first child in March, arrived in the United States in August, after spending many years in a Thai refugee camp. The husband is attending classes to improve his English so that he can find work to support his family. They have been living with a cousin, but are now in the process of moving to their own apartment, which they will need to furnish for themselves and their baby.

59 Mrs. O. is a young mother with two blond, blue-eyed girls, ages four and six. Mr. O., who was laid off several months ago, became discouraged when the couple had to apply for public assistance. His response was to run off to his mother's home in a distant state. Mrs. O. is struggling to adjust for her children's sake.

60 Mrs. A. is a 97-year-old who was recently hospitalized with a broken wrist. She is bright and interested in all that goes on
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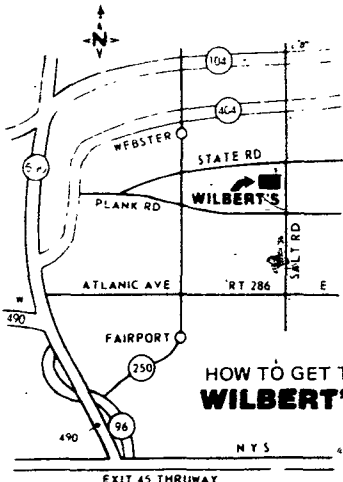
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