

Local News

Study of homelessness reveals surprising data

By Lee Strong

Since the early 1980s, when Rochester's homeless population first gained the attention of local media, shelter providers have described the situation as a crisis. They now have the statistics to prove their contention.

Approximately 4,500 people were sheltered at least once in a homeless facility in Monroe County during the 12-month period between late 1986 and late 1987.

Of that number about 850 children and 450 families sought shelter.

On typical night, between 300 and 325 people in Monroe County are homeless.

These figures are among the findings contained in *Rochester's Homeless Population: Numbers, Characteristics, Needs, Service Gaps*, the long-awaited study from the Mental Health Association's Task Force on the Homeless. The 109-page report — prepared for the task force by the Center for Governmental Research Inc. — was officially released Monday, Feb. 29.

The purpose of the report is to provide factual information to assist the task force in developing recommendations to address the current and future needs of the homeless in Monroe County. The report stipulates that the task force will develop and release these recommendations to the public within three months.

The task force's study is based in part on findings compiled from a survey in which 135 of Monroe County's homeless population were interviewed during the first quarter of 1987. These findings were integrated with more detailed data compiled from a variety of agencies and programs that provide shelter and other services to the county's homeless population.

The report describes the current system of providing services to the homeless; estimates the size of the county's homeless population, indicating seasonal fluctuations and yearly changes; describes in detail the needs and the characteristics of the homeless population; points out gaps in the services currently offered to the homeless; and offers projections on the homeless population over the next few years.

According to task force member William H. Privett, director of Catholic Charities at the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry, the report produced some unexpected findings.

Privett cited the total number of people using the shelter facilities — 4,500 — as one of



UPI/NC News
With temperatures hovering around 20 degrees in Washington, D.C., mourners place their hands on the casket of Henry Dixon during an outdoor funeral for the homeless man and an unidentified homeless woman. Dixon was found dead of exposure in a parking lot booth in early January, and the woman was found five days later. A recent report shows that on a typical night, between 300 and 325 people in Monroe County are homeless.

these surprises. "It's been a general sense in the community that homelessness isn't a problem in Rochester," he observed. Yet the data contradict that sense. "It's shocking to realize that six-tenths of one percent of the population of the county has been without a home at some point," Privett said.

Another myth exploded by the data is the notion that homeless people do not make use of the Monroe County Department of Social Services' financial assistance system. The study shows that 60 percent of the people staying in the parish shelters had had formal contact with

the system, Privett pointed out. More than 50 percent of the sheltered individuals not only applied for assistance, but actually received assistance at some point.

"More of the homeless in our emergency shelters are willing to work with the DSS than we had thought," he observed. "Any preconceived ideas about the (homeless people's) disposition not to work with the system are refuted by the data (in the report)."

These findings, Privett noted, "suggests that we (shelter providers) should work closer with the DSS than we have."

Pat Woods, program director of the Mental Health Association, also found the data surprising. "I had thought the total homeless population was four to five hundred for the county, not 4,500," she said.

She was even more surprised to learn the numbers of homeless families. The findings dispel the myth that the homeless person is the single man who chose to leave his family, Woods noted.

Among the other findings of the report:

- An average of 300 to 325 people in the

Continued on Page 6

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