

Features

High expectations mark end of 6th shelter season

Parish launches shelter facility funding efforts

By Lee Strong

As the three shelters that constitute the parish shelter network ended their sixth season of operation on Saturday, April 16, staff members looked back on a year marked by highs and lows.

The first high came last November when the three parishes — Blessed Sacrament, Corpus Christi and St. Bridget's — learned that they would receive a combined \$21,400 through a \$500 million congressional appropriations bill. The money was to be used for repairs and operating expenses.

Another high came in February when the Mental Health Association's Task Force on the Homeless released its long-awaited study, *Rochester's Homeless Population: Numbers, Characteristics, Needs, Service Gaps*. The study confirmed the shelter providers' contentions about the extent of the homeless problem in Rochester, the vital role the parish shelters play in meeting the emergency needs of the homeless, and the immediate necessity of building a permanent shelter facility.

Yet another high point came in March when St. Ambrose Parish announced plans to donate half of the net proceeds from its 1988 parish festival as seed money to help locate, purchase and renovate a site for a permanent shelter facility. If this year's festival is as successful as last year's — which netted \$38,000 — the donation would amount to \$19,000. In addition, the parish has expanded the size of the festival and added events — including the April 15 basketball game between Buffalo Bills players and Monroe County high school basketball coaches, which raised \$2,600.

The lows, on the other hand, can be found mainly in the shelters' bank accounts.

Two of the shelters — St. Bridget's and Corpus Christi's — are currently in debt. Several times this spring, St. Bridget's shelter ran out of funds and had to rely on the parish for support. Meanwhile, at Corpus Christi, some members of the parish staff went without pay for several weeks so that the shelter could pay its bills.

And although Blessed Sacrament's shelter is not in debt, "the coffers are low," according to the shelter's coordinator, Jim Parsons.

The shelters rely heavily on donations for their funding, Parsons noted, and "the bulk of the money comes between Thanksgiving and Christmas. After the first of the year, homelessness is not an issue in many people's minds."

This year, the drop in donations has been particularly severe, observed Linda Rosier, who coordinates St. Bridget's shelter. One possible cause may have been public awareness of the \$21,400 federal grant the shelters were scheduled to receive. Because of the publicity the grant award received, donors may have thought the shelters did not need as many donations, Rosier speculated.

Although the awards were announced last November, none of the money was released by the city until last week — and even then, the city released only one fourth of the total appropriation. As of Thursday, April 14, none of the parish shelters had actually received any money.

According to William Privett, director of Catholic Charities for the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry and a member of the parish shelter network, the appropriation's delay occurred because "it took the city (until April) to process the paper work." Privett predicted that the rest of the money will be released within the next few weeks.

Meanwhile, the two indebted shelters have begun to pursue additional funding.

Corpus Christi held a "balance the budget" dance on Saturday, April 9, raising \$1,000 for its homeless program. On Saturday, April 30, the parish will run a "Hike for the Homeless" which organizers hope will raise an additional \$20,000. St. Bridget's, meanwhile, plans to solicit additional support from social justice committees of various Monroe County parishes.

Despite the shelters' money problems, however, their staffs say they are committed to reopening in the fall, and to continue opening every winter until a permanent, replace-



Erica Thomas, 9, of the St. Ambrose CYO cheerleading squad, performs during halftime intermission of the exhibition game benefitting the homeless.

ment shelter facility can be developed.

"We are committed to staying open until we find a permanent facility," explained Rosier. "To close (the shelters) now would cause immeasurable harm."

Rosier, who is St. Bridget's community-outreach worker, noted that this past shelter season was a particularly successful one, illustrating the extent of the services the shelters provide for the homeless.

More than 200 men stayed in St. Bridget's shelter, which was full nearly every night, Rosier reported. More important than just shelter, however, were the counseling and support services provided to these men in an effort to stabilize their lives, she noted.

A number of the shelter's guests enrolled in drug- and alcohol-rehabilitation programs and psychiatric-counseling services at such facilities as Park Ridge Hospital, the DePaul Clinic and Rochester Psychiatric Center. The shelter's staff also helped some of the men enroll in job-readiness programs — and even to find jobs.

The staff members also discovered that many of the homeless men were illiterate, and set them up with literacy volunteers. Several of the guests have already earned their graduate examination diplomas as a result of aid received at St. Bridget's shelter, Rosier said. "You'd be amazed how their self-confidence level goes up when they get their GEDs," she added.

In addition, through assistance received at the shelter, 10 men have been placed in apartments, Rosier said.

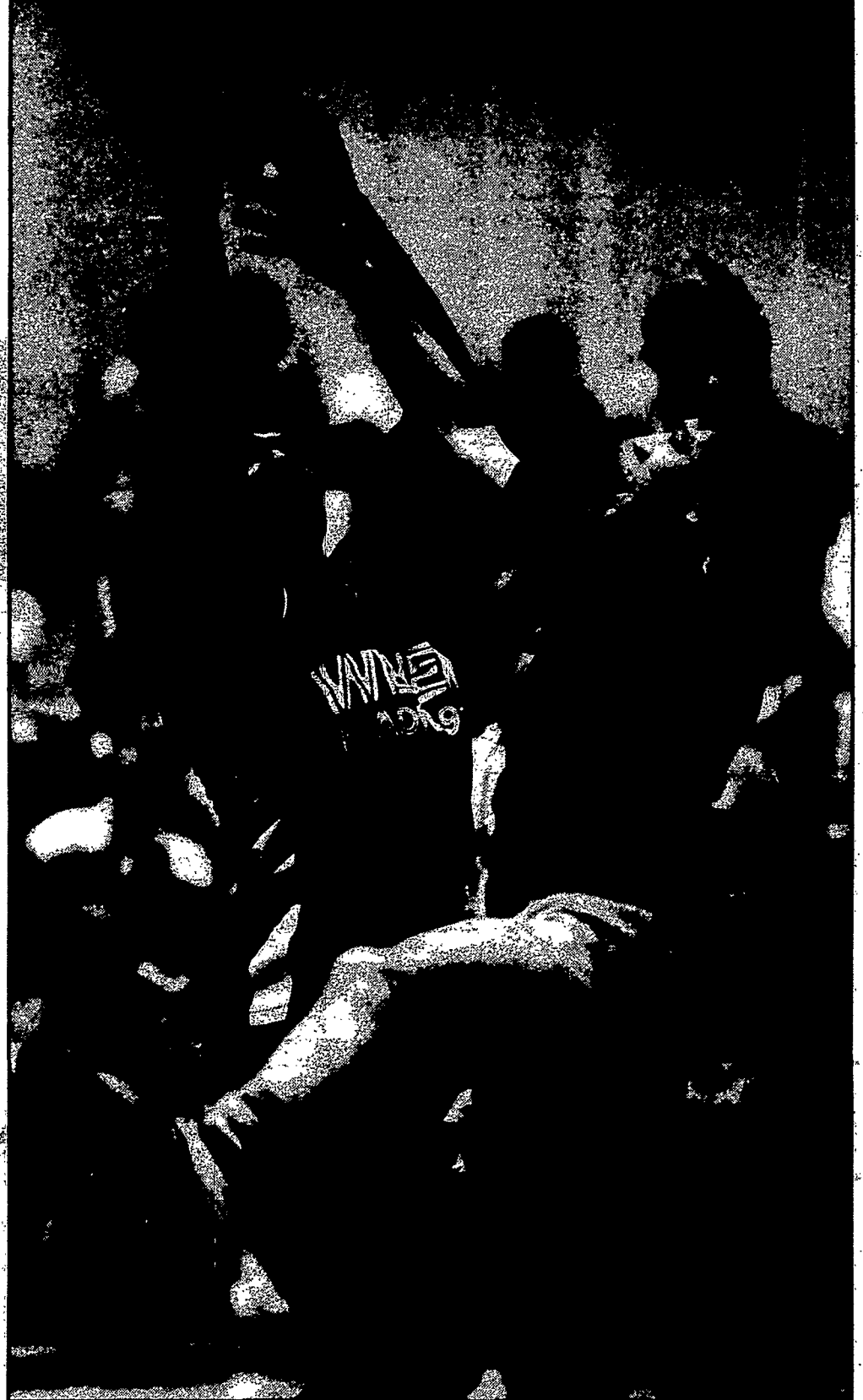
Like Blessed Sacrament's shelter, St. Bridget's operation is run entirely by volunteers, and Rosier attributes the successes of the last season to the volunteers' dedication. "Without them, we could not have had the successful season we've had," she noted.

Jim Dobbertin, who co-directs Dimitri House — which encompasses Corpus Christi's food and shelter programs — also praised the volunteers who staffed the shelter.

"Without the number of volunteers that we get — approximately 175 people — it would just be impossible to run our supper and shelter programs," Dobbertin observed.

Unlike the other two facilities, Corpus Christi's shelter will remain open even if a permanent facility is developed. The shelter will continue as part of a comprehensive parish-outreach ministry involving emergency shelter, food distribution, a supper program, a drop-in center, health and social work services and, beginning June 5, transitional housing. Currently, the supper program operates in the church basement, but eventually all of the programs will be consolidated at the Dimitri House complex on North Union Street.

Renovating the two buildings that constitute the complex has been expensive, accounting for some of the program's financial problems. For example, building the kitchen for the supper program will cost more than \$13,000, Dobbertin estimated. In February, Dimitri House was approved for a \$6,100 Capital Equipment Award from the New York State Department of Health to buy such kitchen equipment as a commercial-sized stove, refrigerator and work table. The award has not been used, however,



Darryl Talley (left) of the Buffalo Bills out-rebounds a coach from the Rochester "3-Pointers" during the Bills' 80-65 victory in the benefit basketball game sponsored by St. Ambrose Parish as part of efforts to bring about a permanent shelter for the homeless.

because the room designated for the kitchen first needs an estimated \$7,000 worth of carpentry and plumbing work.

In addition, Dimitri House, unlike the other shelters, has paid employees — including a social worker and a health-care worker. These workers, however, have enabled the shelter to offer a variety of counseling services to the homeless. Their efforts have been supplemented by assistance from Family Medicine, a health center located on South Avenue; volunteers from the University of Rochester Medical School; and students on field placements from Nazareth College and UR's psychiatric nursing program.

"The need for health care (for the homeless) is acute," Dobbertin noted. "In the last year, we've found liver problems, high blood pressure, infection around the heart, even one person with a touch of tuberculosis."

The health and social services have been an important part of Dimitri House's work over the last year, but even more important has been continuity and continued contact these services — and the staff members — have provided, observed Betty Schmitt, the program's social worker.

"Building relationships and trust, that's what (this program) is all about," Schmitt observed.

Such relationships have helped staff members to realize that homeless people are individuals "who have different needs, different problems," Schmitt noted. "The thing that's common is that everybody has a story. There are reasons for why people are where they are."

Treating the homeless as individuals and with hospitality is central to the philosophy of

the parish shelter network, observed Parsons of Blessed Sacrament.

"We're dealing with people who have fallen through the cracks — they've hit rock bottom," Parsons said. Shelter services are important, he remarked, but hospitality must take precedence so that trust can be established. Trust, in turn, will allow longer-term contact with homeless people, offering a greater chance that staff members can help them to deal with their problems. "There's no way you can solve their problems overnight," Parsons said.

The presence of social workers in Blessed Sacrament's shelter during the last year has provided the guests with greater opportunities to be helped with some of their problems and has freed volunteers to concentrate on personal contact with the guests, Parsons reported.

In the last two years, the shelter has added showers, a washer and drier, and — thanks to a donation from the Xerox Corporation — partitions around the beds to provide some measure of privacy. The overall effect of these physical changes has been to give the guests a greater sense of dignity, Parsons said.

This emphasis on treating the homeless with respect and as individuals is what sets the parish shelters apart from some of the other organizations that work with the homeless, Rosier noted. It also enables the shelter staffs to continue their work, despite the time and energy commitments, and financial problems.

"We believe this is a ministry, and we believe strongly in this ministry," Rosier noted. "We do this because we are committed to the cause, and we won't close until we are no longer needed."

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