

CATHOLIC COURIER

Diocese of Rochester Thursday, April 6, 1989 50¢ 20 Pages

Changing faces of homeless

By Richard A. Kiley
Staff writer

The dwindling number of low-income housing units in Rochester is forcing many city families to hit the streets.

It's a sad situation that Linda Rosier, coordinator of St. Bridget's parish shelter, saw many nights this winter.

"You see a defeated look in the eyes of the children. They just have a vacant stare," Rosier said. "It really hurts to see that."

The shelter coordinator noticed a dramatic increase in the number of women and children at the shelter this winter, a trend she doesn't expect to change anytime soon, as rents continue to increase and subsidized housing continues to disappear.

"A lot of these women cannot afford a \$25 or \$50 increase in their rent," Rosier said. "No new housing has been built to meet this crunch either."

"We're just getting the tip of the iceberg as far as families in this situation," she continued.

On an average night this winter, St. Bridget's shelter fed 25 to 30, including guests who slept in the 10 beds the shelter provides. That figure compares to about 15 to 17 guests fed at the shelter on an average night last year.

The parish also received assistance from the Monroe County Department of Social Services (DSS) in its efforts to place homeless men in city apartments. More than 25 men were placed in apartments this year through St. Bridget's, compared to 10 last year.

According to Patricia Connelly, supervisor of housing units for the DSS, the county is "getting better" in dealing with shelter guests and trying to provide supportive housing for people on public assistance. The department is currently working with nearly 100 private landlords to find apartments for shelter guests in need of housing.



Still, the system is not perfect. Tammy Hall, an 18-year-old mother of two, said the DSS failed to notify her when the Monroe County Health Department ruled last November that the house she was living in at 53 Lincoln St., was in violation of safety codes. She had been placed in the home by the county DSS.

"I came home one day and all my stuff was outside the door," Hall said. "I could have been notified so I could move out on my own."

The DSS then cut off all support when Hall landed a job with a temporary agency. She was making just \$4 an hour.

"They told me that they didn't cut me off because I had a job, but because I didn't bring in my paperwork," Hall said. After being placed in the Monroe Motel, Hall said she took it upon herself to find a permanent home. She and her two children walked two miles from every day to search for an apartment in the city.

She finally found a house, and with the help of the DSS, she now has a new home.

Other are not as fortunate, continuing to rely on the efforts of shelter volunteers. At Blessed Sacrament shelter, for example, volunteers served 10 percent more meals this season than last year, according to shelter coordinator Dick Sadowski.

"It seems people are more aware of the services we provide here. It's obvious that more people are having more difficulty because more people are coming in to eat," Sadowski said.

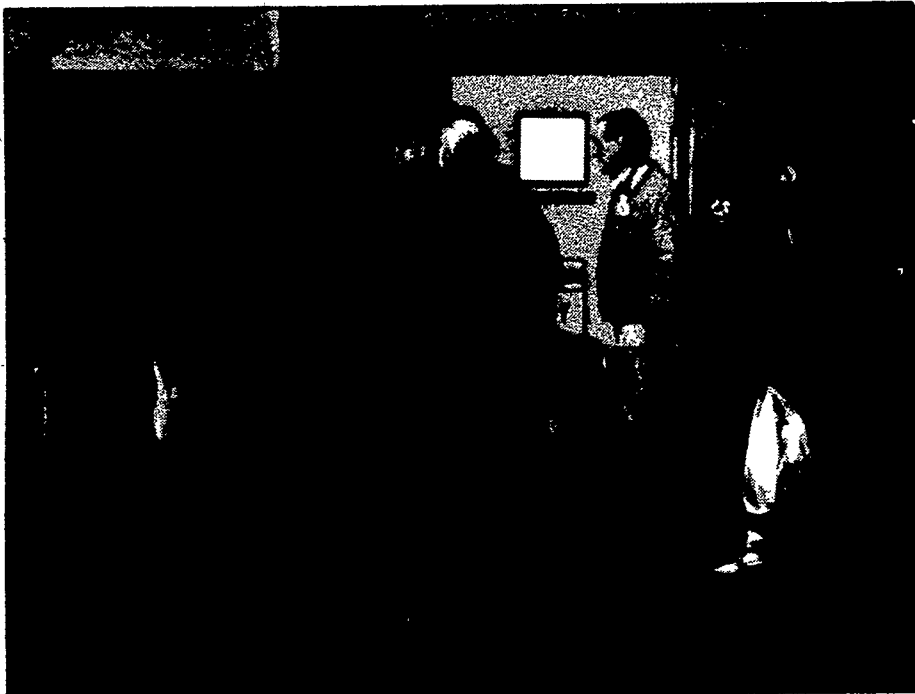
He added that the shelter has been full "90 to 95 percent of the time" this winter and that volunteers have on several occasions had to transport guests to other facilities — such as the Salvation Army or the Open Door Mission — on nights when the shelter was full.

Jim Dobbertin, co-director of Dimitri House — which encompasses the food and shelter programs of Corpus



The tragedy of homelessness has not only affected single homeless men and women, but now engulfs many families who can no longer find affordable housing. Some shelters around Rochester saw increasing numbers of women and children for lunch and supper, especially during months when school was not in session. Tammy Hall, 18, and her two children, Stephan and Ashley, are one among a growing number of families who have found themselves homeless.

— Linda Dow Hayes
Catholic Courier Photographer



Christi Church — said that supper feeding at the shelter was consistently filled to capacity this winter.

"We're always full," said Dobbertin, who added that volunteers served an average of 25 people per night. To help pay for the operational expenses at the shelter, the parish will once again conduct a "Hike for the Homeless" this year. The 6.2-mile trek will take place on Saturday, April 29.

The Rev. Jane E. Baldwin, director of the Cameron Community Ministries, 48 Cameron St., Rochester, said more people — including a number of families — flocked to the ecumenically supported soup kitchen this winter, as compared to last year's demand.

According to Baldwin, the soup kitchen served more than 11,776 meals (40 a day) through its hot lunch program in 1988 compared to 8,269 (32 a day) in 1987. She also noticed an increase in the number of families seeking meals when school was not in session.

"You don't realize how much school lunch programs supplement family incomes," Baldwin said. "We have two to three times more kids in here during June, July and August than we do in other months. December (during Christmas break) is also a busy month."

In all, it was a very busy winter season at homeless shelters throughout the city. Despite the constant rush of activity, shelter volunteers were still able to treat the homeless with respect and as individuals, Rosier said. Building on what the shelter began last year, St. Bridget's continued to offer counseling and support services to its guests, in an effort to help provide some stability in their lives.

Many of those who stayed at St. Bridget's and Blessed Sacrament shelters also took advantage of medical services available at the shelters. For the first time ever, all three parish shelters — St. Bridget's, Blessed Sacrament and Corpus Christi's Dimitri House — were able to provide medical assistance to guests this winter.

The availability of medical attention and follow-up care for the homeless has been a major concern of directors and volunteer staff at all three parish shelters. Only Cor-

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