

Church's reaction mixed to fingerprinting

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Some diocesan and state Catholic leaders are vocally opposing the fingerprint-imaging of welfare recipients, an increasingly popular method of deterring welfare fraud throughout the state. Fingerprinting technology scans a recipient's fingerprint, and, through computer imaging, matches the print against a database to determine whether a client is receiving benefits elsewhere.

The state instituted pilot fingerprint programs in the social service departments of Onondaga and Rockland counties in 1992. Long Island's Suffolk County is currently implementing its own program.

The House of Mercy's Organizing Project, which operates out of the Sister of Mercy Outreach Center in Rochester, is among several organizations protesting a proposal before the Monroe County Legislature to establish a fingerprint-imaging program for the county's welfare recipients.

In addition, Carolyn Portanova, executive director of Catholic Family Center, 25 Franklin St., 7th floor, Rochester, co-authored an anti-fingerprinting article that appeared in the March edition of the center's Social Action Update newsletter.

"The only identifiable 'benefit' from fingerprinting is to discourage people from using public assistance," Portanova and others wrote in the article. "Perhaps this is the unstated reason for fingerprinting in the first place."

The article, which also ran in the



S. John Wilkin/ Staff Photographer

Readers' Say section of the March 1 *Democrat and Chronicle*, was also authored by leaders of various community organizations and agencies, who nonetheless stressed that they were speaking on their own behalf, and not for their respective agencies.

Other critics here in the Rochester diocese have labeled welfare recipient fingerprinting as a waste of public monies and a dehumanizing attempt to stigmatize the poor.

"It's saying 'you're guilty' before someone is proven guilty," observed Brian Kane, director of social policy and research at Catholic Family Center.

Supporters have countered arguments that fingerprinting is dehumanizing by noting that millions of citizens are fingerprinted in the military and for a variety of jobs, and that fingerprinting will save taxpayers money that could be potentially lost to fraud.

One of the leading proponents of welfare recipient fingerprinting is Monroe County Legislator Renee Forgenshi Davison, Rep.-8th District. A parishioner at St. Paul's in Webster, a parishioner at St. Ann in Westster, Davison finds the opposition of some Catholic leaders to her proposal baffling.

"They're acting like this is the only time in the world that we're fingerprinting everybody," she said.

When asked if fingerprinting might scare away some potential clients, she replied: "If there's no criminal intent, then there shouldn't be a problem."

Both sides have cited a state report issued in January, 1994, to buttress their arguments. The report noted that most

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Mercy efforts help those affected by AIDS

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

ROCHESTER — Wendy Wickstrom knows what it's like to be a member of a church where AIDS is not discussed.

"I was involved in a very conservative church where you never could use the word AIDS," recalled Wickstrom, currently a parishioner at St. Mary's Church in downtown Rochester.

In October, 1990, Wickstrom lost her brother, Randy, to acquired immune deficiency syndrome — an affliction in which a virus attacks the body's immune system, leaving victims susceptible to a wide variety of infections and cancers. And although she and her family found emotional relief through various groups in the Rochester community, they had a hard time finding spiritual support.

"I wanted to confirm that my God was not a judgmental one," Wickstrom said.

She and her family found that confirmation through a monthly reflection group offered at the Mercy Prayer Center, 65 Highland Ave. The group is intended for any people affected by the disease — those who have it, as well as friends, family and loved ones of individuals who have AIDS or HIV (any of several retroviruses that infect human T cells and cause AIDS).

The reflection group — which has met the third Thursday of each month since 1992 — is one of two programs operated by the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester. The Mercy Spiritual Companion Program, which provides one-on-one spiritual companionship to people affected by AIDS and which also operates a hot line, was started in September, 1993.

The two programs grew out of the Sister of Mercy's general chapter meeting in 1989, according to Sister Barbara Moore, RSM, who chairs the congregation's AIDS ministry committee, and who, along with Sister Therese Richard-

son, RSM, helps coordinate the reflection group.

Initially, congregation members considered opening AIDS hospices, Sister Moore explained. But after surveying programs already available and talking with individuals in Rochester-area social service and medical agencies, she said, the research group decided that "we should offer people with AIDS what we were trained to do. We decided to develop a spiritual ministry."

"We're trying to bring the spirit of God into the way (people) are trying to deal with the situation," observed Deacon Al Bergeron, who helps coordinate the companion program along with his wife, Catherine. "It was discovered that people who have AIDS typically do not turn to God because people in the church have been slow to respond."

The reflection group, which has had approximately 40 members since its inception, was the first of the two AIDS programs the sisters developed. During group meetings, participants hear talks by experts or people working with people with AIDS, discuss issues affecting their own lives or simply listen to each other. Most of the people in the program are parents or siblings of people with AIDS or of someone who has died of the disease, Sister Moore said.

Wickstrom and her mother, Barbara, learned of the program in 1991 while attending a Christmas party for people with AIDS and their families. Since coming to the first meeting, the two women have been regular participants in the group.

"I think that sometimes I'm saddened and I don't know why, and it gives me a chance to talk," Wickstrom said. At other times, she finds herself providing support for others who are themselves down or grieving.

The Spiritual Companion program also developed out of the research that

led to the reflection program.

Deacon Bergeron noted that the companion program took nearly a year to get off the ground due to the tremendous planning involved. "We didn't want to be a flash in the pan," he explained. "We wanted to make sure we were well grounded."

The initial group of 18 volunteers was trained in September, 1993. A second training will take place this spring, although no dates have yet been set, he noted. Catherine Bergeron, a retired medical social worker, keeps records and links trained volunteers with people seeking companions.

Companions meet with individuals for such activities as Bible study, conversation and prayer.

Thus far, eight people have taken advantage of the program, Deacon Bergeron said, noting, "It takes time for word to get around for any kind of new program."

Now the program needs more volunteers to help it grow even more, Deacon Bergeron said. Meanwhile, a brochure in Spanish is being developed to reach out to the Hispanic community.

One of the keys to the success of both programs so far, Deacon Bergeron explained, is that no attempts have been made to judge people who have AIDS. Rather than dealing with how people catch the disease, the programs are intended to help individuals and loved ones deal with the disease.

"What concerns us is that person's relationship with God," Deacon Bergeron said, "so the person who has AIDS doesn't believe they will die with God hating them."

EDITORS' NOTE: For information about the reflection group, call 716/244-6758 or the Mercy Prayer Center at 473-6893. For information about the Spiritual Companion Program, call 671-6070 or the center.

St. Patrick's parade slated for Rochester

ROCHESTER — Weather permitting, this year's St. Patrick's Day parade is scheduled for Saturday, March 12 in downtown Rochester. The day's festivities will begin with a 9 a.m. Mass at St. Mary's Church, 15 St. Mary's Place, followed by the Run for the Shamrocks — beginning at the Holiday Inn Genesee Plaza at 10:30 a.m. — and flag-raising ceremonies, Irish music and dancing at City Hall, 30 Church St., starting at 10:45 a.m.

The march down Main Street is scheduled to begin at 12:30 p.m.

The grand marshal for this year's parade is Joseph F. O'Heaney, chief executive officer and president of DeRidder Inc. A 50/50 raffle will be held to help defray the parade's cost. Call 716/234-7128 or 671-1048 for information on the raffle.

Also, the United Irish Societies will host a dinner dance at Logan's Party House, 1420 Scottsville Road. Call Mary LaBarr at 716/544-7088 for information.

In addition, the chapel at St. Mary's Hospital, 89 Genesee St., will again host its annual St. Patrick's Day Mass on March 20, at 11 a.m. Father Frederick Helfrich, hospital chaplain, will celebrate the Mass. Patty and Bill Arcuri will serve as lectors.

Cantor-soloist will be Loretta Cisterna Doyle, who will be accompanied by Bill Fay. Doyle will perform such traditional favorites as "Danny Boy" and "Galway Bay," as a musical prelude to the Mass. Doyle's husband, Andy, will recite the Lord's Prayer in Gaelic.

Loretta Doyle will also perform with the Blackthorn Ceilidh Band at City Hall at 11 a.m. March 12 for flag-raising ceremonies prior to the parade in Rochester.