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Homeless

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longer be available as a shelter. He did not believe city claims that there were enough beds to house the homeless, he said.

"I just knew that that was incorrect, or there would be no need for the House of Mercy," he observed.

He is now even more convinced.

"There a need for what (Sister Grace Miller) is doing," Sutherland said.

But despite Sutherland's experiment, the question remains: Are there enough beds for the homeless in the community?

The answer is yes — and no.

According to a 1995 report by the Center for Governmental Research — which surveyed social service agencies, homeless shelter providers and homeless individuals — as of 1995 there were more than 500 beds available in Monroe County for the homeless. That figure represented an increase of approximately 50 percent since the CGR's 1988 study on homelessness in the county.

Those currently available beds include not only those provided by such regular shelters as Corpus Christi Parish's Dimitri House, both the Catholic Family Center's Francis Center and Women's Place, and the Open Door Mission, but also the House of Mercy and hotel rooms rented by the Department of Social Services.

During that same period, the report noted, there were between 380 and 405 homeless people in Monroe County on a typical night — likewise an increase of 50 percent since 1988 — with an average of 375 people finding shelter each night.

"Clearly there are enough beds in terms of just plain numbers," noted Don Prior, director of human services analysis for the CGR. But, he added, "The key is there are a number of types of shelters that are full on any given night."

Those full and often overcrowded shelters include those that serve women and families. They also include those that accommodate clients who are hard to place because they have substance abuse and behavioral problems, because they had exceeded time limits at other shelters, or because, like Sutherland, they did not meet some other criteria.

Meanwhile, other facilities had empty beds.

"Many of these (unused) beds that exist



Monisa and Michael King, shown at the House of Mercy, plan to move into their newly-found apartment.

are not accessible to some homeless people on a given night" due to these problems and conditions, Prior observed.

Indeed, the 1995 CGR report notes that "on an average night about 15 people are turned away from one or more of the community's homeless shelters, either because they are full or because a person doesn't qualify for one or more reasons."

Jacque Whitfield, director of the Bureau of Human Services for the City of Rochester, acknowledged that city officials have been aware that some people don't fit into the system as it currently operates.

"It's not an indictment of the system," she said. "I think the issue now is how can the system serve the hard-to-serve population."

The House of Mercy, she added, has shown how to work with this population.

"The challenge now," she said, "is learning from the House of Mercy staff."

Sister Miller pointed out that part of the House of Mercy's success is due to an open attitude and minimal rules and structures. These distinctions help in dealing with people other providers consider hard to serve.

"They came in on their own accord because we accept them the way they are," she contended.

They are given the time and acceptance they need to heal — conditions, she argued,

that they don't find at some of the shelters where there are time limits or demands placed on them to get into programs.

"You have a population who are really damaged psychologically and socially. You also have people, the street has been their home, and you place them in a structured environment — it doesn't work," she said. "It takes time. In some places, one week, three weeks you're out. People don't change in one week."

Such time limits can be particularly difficult for individuals applying for public assistance, which takes 45 days to receive, she noted. In addition, many of the people are intimidated by the bureaucracy encountered when applying for government aid.

"We have people we know should be in treatment," she said. "You can tell them until you're blue in the face that they need to get into a rehab program. You have to wait until they are ready. You can't force changes on people. It's got to be from them."

Dimitri House likewise tries to offer help to this harder-to-serve population, but is limited to seven men a night. So it generally has to find shelter elsewhere for two to three additional men each night.

"I think a lot of people say we're a Band-Aid agency and we enable," noted acting director Fran Morse. "I don't think so. We try to be there, to encourage them, to give them a safe place. Eventually, if you can have some kind of contact with a person, they eventually know we are all here because we want to offer them some hope."

Finding ways to offer such help — and to reach the hard-to-serve population — is one of the issues likely to be discussed in the coming months by two community groups dealing with the homeless issue.

One is the Homeless Services Network, comprising representatives from programs working with the homeless. Morse, who has attended some of the meetings, noted that the group addresses such issues as funding and policies. Last summer, for example, members developed a set of standards for shelters serving 19 or fewer individuals.

The second is the Homeless Continuum of Care Implementation Team, a city-formed group that brings together government and social service agency representatives to discuss care for the homeless.

Whitfield pointed out that the Continuum of Care group has had available U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development funds for dealing with the home-

less. And it has for the past few years sought proposals from homeless service providers for developing programs to work with the hard-to-serve segment of the population — but had received no proposals.

"Funding has not been the problem," Whitfield contended. "I think it's been the willingness to deal with the population."

She acknowledged, however, that one of the problems may have been that in the past, the city limited the size of such proposals to \$50,000, an amount providers have said is too small to cover the costs of such programs. The city may eventually increase the amount available, she said.

Part of what has been helping to keep the problem hidden, she said, is that the fact that the House of Mercy was taking care of people who fell through the cracks.

"I think the system needed a wake-up call," Whitfield said.

The House of Mercy itself may prove the long-term solution for dealing with the hard-to-serve homeless, Whitfield suggested. In addition, however, city officials are looking into alternative solutions. One possibility is creating a "safe house" similar to the flop houses operated in other cities that shelter individuals who do not fit into more structured environments.

The recent "wake-up call" may also help to alert people to the fact that shelter providers are facing problems beyond dealing with the hard-to-serve population.

"At a time when the population in the community itself has been fairly flat, the homeless population grew by almost 50 percent," Prior said, comparing the results of the 1988 and 1995 studies.

The number of homeless families, children and women alone has increased by 80 percent over that span, Prior noted.

"There's a good possibility that the numbers of homeless will continue to increase," Prior warned.

Indeed, the 1995 report makes that prediction on the basis of such factors as changes in the economy, the increasing concentration of relatively low-paying, low-benefit jobs in the community, housing costs, changes in the welfare system, federal- and state-budget related service reductions, and high levels of substance abuse.

Sister Miller is ready for the challenge. "We're going to deal with the overflow to make sure everyone is taken care of," Sister Miller said. "We will not refuse anyone who needs help."

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