

Parishes join interfaith effort to aid homeless

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

About 30 people attended a Nov. 13 meeting to talk about the formation of an interfaith network to help homeless families.

The Rochester Area Interfaith Hospitality Network will be affiliated with Family Promise, formerly known as the National Interfaith Hospitality Network, based in Summit, N.J. The network has programs in 107 U.S. communities where congregations of various faiths jointly commit to helping homeless families become independent, according to Claas Ehlers, Family Promise's national director of network development.

Ehlers was on hand for the meeting at Fairport's Church of the Assumption. He noted that Family

Promise has enabled children in homeless families to remain in stable school environments while their parents sort out problems that have made them homeless.

"The core of this program is children and their future, and what we can provide for children and their future," he said.

RAIHN is tentatively slated to begin full-scale operation by March 2004, according to board member Denise Mack, pastoral associate at Assumption. Mack said her parish council voted last month to make Assumption a host church. Host congregations agree to provide sleeping accommodations for one week at a time up to four weeks a year for families; hospitality rooms where they can relax, do homework, watch TV and socialize; and

evening meals, breakfast and bag lunches for family members. During the day, family members either work, look for work or housing, or go to school, RAIHN members said.

Meanwhile, Mack said, St. Mary's Parish in Rochester has committed to becoming a "support" congregation, which would supply volunteers to its neighboring host congregation, First Universalist Church.

Alain Perregaux, a RAIHN board member and member of First Universalist, said that families are moved weekly from the facilities of one congregation to those of another. A network director guides them through the processes necessary to gain housing and employment, Perregaux said.

Perregaux said RAIHN's goal is

to get at least 13 congregations to become host sites, so that each congregation can be available to host families four weeks out of the 52 in a year. Typically, a congregation spends \$200 a week on meals and other amenities for the families, he said. Generally, a congregation will need at least 60 to 70 volunteers to function as a host site, Perregaux said. Volunteers are needed to do such things as make meals and interact with the families, Ehlers added.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For information on RAIHN, call Rochester's Third Presbyterian Church at 585/271-6513, or visit www.coatclip.com/raihn/raihn_org.html. For information on Family Promise, visit www.nihn.org.

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