

Understanding the Rochester Homelessness Crisis

(A Guide for Parishioners)

I. Question:

I keep hearing about homelessness in the news and in the papers, I never knew we had a homeless problem in Rochester. Who are they and where do they come from? I'm in the city from time-to-time, why do I never see them?

Answer:

We have always had homelessness in Rochester. In fact, the City of Rochester has between 9,000 – 10,000 individuals who experience homelessness every year. Every year they go unnoticed because the overwhelming majority of homeless do not fit the stereotype of a pan handler begging on the street for change. The real face of homelessness both in Rochester and throughout the country is predominantly a single mother with two kids.

II. Question:

How did they become Homeless?

Answer:

This is a complicated question as homelessness risk factors increase with many of society's failings such as: not treating mental illness or substance abuse, lack of adequate education, lack of employment opportunities, domestic violence, and loss of family support, to name some of the most prevalent. If we look at research however, two themes surface time and time again:

- First, human beings do not become homeless, they experience it. Anyone can experience homelessness... anyone. Therefore homelessness is not who you are or what you have become; rather, homelessness is what's happening to you.*
- Second, and perhaps most important: Poverty is the number 1 contributor to homelessness. Think of the many celebrities who are addicted to drugs, grew up in broken homes, experience domestic violence...why are they not homeless? The answer is obvious - because they have resources, they're rich. But it's not just the rich, even "the middle-class" have resources that the poor and vulnerable do not. Think of your own life and circle of people around you. Do you know someone who drinks too much? Do you know someone who grew up without a father? Do you know anyone with severe depression? We all do, but it doesn't mean they experience homelessness, and chances are it's because they are not extremely poor or have family who can and are willing to support them.*

III. Question:

When I read things in the press or watch the news, it sounds like we are doing nothing as a community, is that true? How do you help the homeless?

Answer:

This is simply not true, in fact, a conservative estimate is that Monroe County Providers and Government agencies provide services to at least 95% of the

homeless population in Rochester, Monroe County DHS alone placed and paid for well over 8,000 homeless individuals in 2014. These providers work collaboratively and include: Catholic Family Center, Salvation Army, Volunteers of America, YWCA, Open Door Mission, United Way, Monroe County DHS, the City of Rochester, and many more. The goal upon entry at one of these homeless shelters is to provide a safe environment and support the individual or family in the acquisition of permanent housing.

Generally speaking the best way to eliminate homelessness is to adhere to the practice of providing "Housing First." This model argues that unlike traditional interventions of getting people "ready" to live on their own, simply providing the housing as soon as possible and then establishing self-sufficiency services afterwards is a more effective approach. This is because research has shown that people need stability in order to grow and stability is not present unless they have the basic necessities of life: Food, Clothing, and of course Shelter, in other words their own place to live. Research has also shown that Housing First can actually be more cost effective to the tax payer.

IV. Question:

So if we are serving the majority, who are the homeless people at 'Sanctuary Village' that are all over the news? They don't seem to have a place to go.

Answer:

The former occupants of the Civic Center Garage (now 'Sanctuary Village' or 'Tent City') are a small portion of the homeless but are the hardest to serve individuals. They are approximately 99% males and represent about 2% of the total homeless population on an annual basis. They are often referred to as the "hard core", "street homeless", or "chronically homeless." These are individuals who have consistently denied traditional models of service for a variety of reasons be it severe mental illness, lack of trust, and a propensity to feel safer or more free on the street than they would in "programs". They are a complex set of individuals with an extremely low success rate in traditional programs.

V. Question:

What is the Catholic Church doing? Is CFC involved?

Answer:

As a member of the Catholic Church you should be proud to know that Catholic Family Center is the largest provider of homeless services in Rochester serving thousands of homeless every year. We have been intricately involved in a collaborative street outreach program to the 'hard-core homeless' referred to above for over a year now and have had a good deal of success. CFC has spent the last year building relationships with the "street homeless" of Rochester and over time we have had success getting some of these individuals to trust us and let us help them find housing. In the second half of 2014 CFC has:

- Provided Permanent Supportive Housing to 8 of the approximately 50-60 hard-core homeless.*
- Adjusted our emergency shelter rules, policies and procedures to make them more conducive to the hard-to-serve population.*

- *Provided transportation to all Monroe County Shelters during street outreach events*
- *Provided FREE (also known as hospitality) shelter stay to “street homeless” during the winter months at a cost of at least \$10,000.*
- *Provided 24/hrs a day 7 day a week on-call support to the mayor’s office in regards to supporting the on-going efforts to find a solution to the current “street homeless” situation.*
- *Conducted street outreach several times per week over the last 3 months in an effort to build trust, and provide service.*
- *Actively participated in the Monroe County Chronic Homelessness planning committee.*

VI. Question:

So if all this activity is happening and you’re seeing success, why is there still a need for the House of Mercy / Sister Grace to raise funds and/or find a new location to ‘house’ the individuals from Sanctuary Village / Tent City?

Answer:

There are many strategies to addressing the needs of the “street homeless.” One perspective is to create a low barrier shelter that is downtown centric and more attractive to this population. When we listen to some of the concerns addressed by the “street homeless” some have said that they would be more likely to go to an emergency shelter if it was downtown and had fewer rules. This is what Sister Grace is working towards with the announcement of a location donated for the winter from Buckingham Properties.

While doing street outreach we have learned that this may be a viable solution for some but not for others. We have also learned that even when we can get this population into emergency shelter they often decide not to stay for long for a variety of reasons. Thus, it remains to be seen as to whether or not this will work for the majority of the population, and if it works for the winter, will it work on a long term basis, to solve the problem.

We will continue to offer support to Sister Grace via continued outreach to the street homeless, the availability of hospitality nights at our shelters and access to our case workers should any of the street homeless desire that service.

VII. Question:

What can I do to help?

Answer:

- *Alert your parish to the good work being done to serve the homeless through Catholic Family Center – we are involved.*
- *Welcome speakers from CFC to address the topic of homelessness in our community.*
- *Consider a parish contribution to our on-going efforts and need to provide uncompensated hospitality nights to the chronically homeless.*