

Cold, hungry, homeless

PADS homeless shelter in need of help after \$40,000 budget shortfall

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By Courtney Greve Staff writer

Gerry feels like a "nonperson" after six months of living in cars, crashing on couches and riding the CTA elevated trains at night.

"I have no money, no transportation, no ID. I can't even get a library card so I can look for a job on the Internet," he said. "It's like I don't exist. I'm trapped, and I can't find my way out."

Last Christmas, 45-year-old Gerry was working at a factory in Wisconsin and living with his girlfriend. Then he was injured at work, his relationship fell apart, and he struck out on his own without much money to start again.

Life went from bad to worse.

Gerry moved to Chicago's South Side and lived in his car until it was stolen along with all of his belongings.

"Survival is the strongest instinct a person has," he said. "You do what you have to do to stay alive."

Gerry shared his feelings about being homeless over a free meal of spaghetti with meatballs and garlic bread at Southwest Chicago PADS on the edge of Marquette Park in Chicago.

"These people at PADS help," he said. "It's lonely being on the streets. Coming here keeps my spirits up."

As did others interviewed for this story, Gerry declined to give his last name.

A cold winter

Southwest Chicago PADS (Public Action to Deliver Shelter), founded in 1993 by Sister Therese DelGenio, feeds a warm meal to 35 homeless people five nights a week between October and May.

At the end of the four-hour reprieve, the "guests" walk out into the cold to find a park bench, building vestibule, abandoned house or vacant garage where they can sleep.

Often, and especially during freezing winter stretches, Sister Therese has no choice but to turn people away with only a sack lunch.

"I can't help everybody," she said matter-of-factly. "That's a hard thing to say."

"The reality is our numbers grow every year," she continued. "As the economy gets worse and people struggle more to make ends meet, more people become homeless or on the verge of it happening."

More need, less money

How many homeless live in Chicago is a number in dispute.

The city's last count numbered 6,715 people.

A study sponsored by the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless estimated that from July 2005 through June 2006, 73,656 people were homeless at one time in Chicago.

On a typical night, 21,078 people were homeless, the study estimates.

Of those homeless throughout the year, 36 percent, or 26,413, were children, the study concluded.

During the 2006 fiscal year, which ended June 30, Southwest Chicago PADS served 1,316 guests, up 16 percent from the previous year. Many of them are repeat visitors, and 36 percent are women, a jump of 6 percent.

Meanwhile, the shelter is facing a \$40,000 budget shortfall because two anticipated grants went to other organizations this year, Sister Therese said.

"There's more need and less money," she said.

The shelter receives no government funding. It survives on charitable donations from foundations, organizations, churches, schools and individuals.

Building up hope

Sister Therese is asking people to donate whatever they can to cover the gap. A \$250 contribution will cover the cost of helping one homeless person for an entire year.

"People come in hopeless, in despair and in the pits," she said. "We start to build up hope."

It's a place where 12-step programs meet weekly, life improvement classes are popular, and a doctor gives check-ups twice a month. Guests can "shop" in the basement clothing store and pick up toiletries such as toothpaste and mouthwash.

Case workers help people get identification cards, job interviews, medical care and permanent housing. Phones and e-mail are available to help clients connect with loved ones.

Before the meal begins, diners sign up for tasks listed on a dry erase board: sweep the floor, clean bathrooms, wipe down tables, etc.

Sister Therese calls it "sweat equity," a way to let her guests know they should treat the shelter as their home and fellow diners like family. She asks about birthdays and anniversary. She reminds people to remove their hats.

After dinner, the group kicks back on the couch to watch old reruns of "Bewitched" and "All in the Family."

A placard on a display case recognizes the "guest of the month," a man going through a detox program.

"He stopped in yesterday, and he's looking good," Sister Therese said. "Around here, if you follow through to get an eye exam and get glasses, that's considered a success."

Struggling together

LaDonte, 26, and Edna, 20, an engaged couple who both ran away as teenagers, clutch to the idea they will one day get off the streets.

They said they became homeless because they clashed with their parents and other relatives.

"I was being hard-headed and not listening to my mother and father," said LaDonte.

At 16, he started selling drugs and had a daughter. He once spent 111 days in prison for unlawful use of a weapon, although he claims he got the gun to protect himself and his fianc-- on the streets.

"I'm on and off the street, and I don't like it," he said.

Edna said she paid a high price for gaining her independence at 14. "We go place to place to place," she said. "It's not easy out here."

They say they want to work toward getting their GED's, but they haven't taken any steps in that direction. For now, they panhandle or sweep gas stations to scrape together a few pennies.

Home, for now

Somehow, LaDonte said he feels "blessed."

"I met Edna out here, and I'm not dead like most of my friends," he said.

Colleen, 41, said six of the friends she made at Southwest Chicago PADS died over the summer for myriad reasons.

The bright-eyed, freckled-face woman doesn't want to join that list. About a decade ago, she started drinking and doing drugs. Her eight children were taken away by the state, and she's been homeless since.

"I've lost a lot of close friends out here," she said. "One day, I hope to be back inside my own place using my own key. For now, (the PADS shelter) is home."

Photo Gallery: http://www.dailysouthtown.com/182056.dst_padsgal_1222.photogallery.

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How to help:

Southwest Chicago PADS is facing a \$40,000 budget shortfall. The shelter always accepts volunteers, new and gently-used items, and food. For more information about how to donate, call (773) 844-7737. Checks can be mailed to P.O. Box 29453, Chicago, IL 60629.

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