

Local churches become overnight homeless sites

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With the economy pushing more households into financial uncertainty, people who help the homeless are starting to see a rising trend among their clients: two parent families.

During the most recent fiscal year, 119 families asked for homeless assistance in DuPage County, which is a 49 percent increase over the previous year, said Carol Simler, executive director for DuPage PADS. More than 150 children were without the safety of a home, and 75 of those children were under the age of 5.

PADS, which stands for Public Action to Deliver Shelter, is a widely used resource in the homeless community. Clients often turn to its overnight sites, run out of local churches, for a warm bed and plate of food during the winter -- and sometimes summer -- months.

This Saturday will again mark the start of the organization's overnight housing program, which includes sites at Elmhurst Presbyterian Church and Community Presbyterian Church of Clarendon Hills. Doors will be open to the homeless from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. through April.

The first to be let in will be children and families.

"We didn't expect (the number of visits to) be that high last year," Simler said. "We think it is important that children have a place to sleep."

Simler said the drastic increase in the homeless family population is a result of the economy. People with higher paying jobs are often the first to be laid off, and those seeking lower paying jobs are finding even less pay.

However, homelessness in general doesn't just happen overnight, she said. With circumstances such as job loss, people will rely on certain support systems to help themselves either financially or emotionally. But when friends or family members don't exist, the homeless turn to agencies such as PADS to hopefully find a way out of their situation.

"It didn't happen overnight. It happened over time," she said.

Through housing, teaching life skills and connecting people with employment, Simler strongly believes the PADS model is a way to end suburban homelessness.

Clients who come into a shelter leave with a plan. Whether it is being connected with permanent housing, mental health help or given bus passes to attend substance abuse meetings, she said the goal is to stop individuals from being recycled back to the streets.

"People do not get things from us unless it is wrapped with a plan," she said.

Last year, 12 families were able to secure housing, 14 people enrolled in a GED course, four obtained employment and moved into housing and two people living in transitional housing purchased homes.

She is hoping to continue this trend by further connecting the homeless community to its various services by expanding out into the northern and southern parts of the county.

"We know so much energy has gone into survival that to think beyond that is a real challenge in this county," she said.

There are 30 temporary PADS sites throughout the county. Neither the Elmhurst nor Clarendon Hills sites operate during the summer, but Redeemer Lutheran Church in Hinsdale does offer overnight housing through the warmer months. Simler said the goal is to offer overnight housing 365 days a year; PADS is 97 percent there thanks to more than 4,000 volunteers and more than 130 congregations.

"They are the heart and soul," she said. "They are who make this work."

For more information about PADS or to learn about other services the organization offers, visit www.dupagepads.org.