



## Lack of shelter forces homeless into dangerous situations

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ROMEDEVILLE—On benches within the wide expanse of community parks, under bridges, in forest preserves, desolate back alleys or abandoned vehicles, the homeless seek an isolated spot where they can close their eyes and dream of a life that refuses to define every moment as a crisis or each meal as a victory over starvation. During the warm months, from May through September, the bulk of overnight services for the dispossessed shut their doors to recoup and take a break from the grueling regimen of providing a steady source of overnight shelter during the traditionally colder months in the Midwest.

Kathleen Johnson, director of development for the chief nonprofit social service agency in DuPage County that deals specifically with the population of homeless, the lack of emergency shelter in the spring and summer months is like a wound that refuses to heal. With upwards of 2,000 men, women and children classified as homeless and dependent on DuPage County's Public Action to Deliver Shelter for emergency shelter or housing assistance, lining up potential resources is an ominous endeavor.

While the 20-plus regular sites, including St. Mary of Gostyn Parish in Downers Grove and St. Walter Parish in Roselle, have already or are scheduled to temporarily close their doors for part of the summer, Johnson said in a June 11 interview with the Catholic Explorer, "Our challenge is how do we provide that overnight emergency care for the summer?" At PADS, the reconfigured warm weather plan takes on a creative aspect that entails a combination of spotty alliances between clusters of churches co-managing a single site. With less than 60 percent of the normal volunteer organizations operating overnight shelters, the availability spreads thin across the 220 miles of arterial highways in the west suburban county. PADS is down to zero site availability for Tuesdays throughout the month of June and lacks a commitment for Mondays or Tuesdays throughout the month of July. Meanwhile, Friday and Saturday nights in the month of August offer limited capabilities, detailed Johnson.

"You can imagine during a storm or at night when the bugs are out...or in the torrid heat of August" that homelessness becomes an experience the frail won't weather well, according to Johnson.

Left to their own devices, many of the homeless make the trek to the beaches in downtown Chicago to sleep along the sandy shore of Lake Michigan; others construct a makeshift shelter of their own under bridges or in forest preserves. "They're in secret places, places you won't normally see," she added. The cracks in the system of emergency housing put an already marginal population at risk of injury from animals or attack by gang members or violence prone individuals.

With the idea that there's safety in numbers, some have banded together and set up mini-communities made up of blankets joined with knots to cover a communal roof and walls of cardboard, enforced with fallen branches for support against the elements—gusty winds or rain. Sometimes they pool meager resources and rent a motel room for a night, said Johnson.

For Mike Hoffman, a 22-year veteran social worker with the Naperville Police Department, it's never easy to witness the deprivation that defines the lives of the homeless. "It's hard when it's a mother

with kids.” The attitude of resignation he observes in a mother’s eyes and the blank look of despair that dominates the gaze of youngsters disrupted at the core of their existence demands compassion over condemnation, he told the Explorer.

The NPD has ready access to a network of social services as a guide that points the homeless to available summer sites. Meanwhile, the “Chaplains Fund” filled by ministers and church organizations in the community is distributed at the discretion of the NPD to assist in the purchase of a train ticket for a ride within a reasonable reach of an overnight facility, said Hoffman. Depending on the individual circumstance, he added, the NPD has put families up in a motel for a night or two to fill the gap in the rendering of social services.

Deputy Chief Tom Meloni of the Wheaton Police Department has observed a growing sense of empathy for the homeless by the community and law enforcement in general. The mid 20th century image of an urban Skid Row where chronic alcoholics existed on the streets and slept in doorways in deteriorating neighborhoods has given way to overall awareness about the problem and the multiple issues that contribute to it such as minimal skills, mental illness and addictions. The officer credits churches and PADS staff for informing the community and residents of surrounding towns about the plight of the dispossessed and the complicated set of emotional, physical and financial triggers that feed into a cycle of homelessness. “Compassion is one part of our mission statement,” he added.

Wheaton’s downtown business district and community parks are located within a stone’s throw of the PADS headquarters, where programs operate throughout the day during the summer to assist individuals and families in their attempt to transition into a more stable lifestyle. During the day, people in the community have grown to accept the homeless who occupy park benches or sit under trees. “We strive to protect everyone’s constitutional rights and that includes the homeless. If they’re not breaking the law, they’re not subject to arrest for trespassing or loitering,” he said.

Jeané Garza, manager for the Downtown Wheaton Association, said business owners in general along the Liberty Street shopping area demonstrate patience when it comes to grappling with individuals who struggle under the weight of issues that mark them as among the habitual homeless. The business owners recognize the distinguishing symptoms of people existing in the state of persistent homelessness and understand that the one or two who regularly stroll the street are “harmless.” Restaurant owners have been known to serve them meals or they send food to PADS directly, she said.

Still, Johnson fears the effects of weather—allergies, heat stroke and heart attack to name a few—on those left to sleep outside. Meloni said police are trained to spot individuals, especially those within the ranks of the homeless, for heat-related medical ailments. “We call the paramedics and take them to the hospital,” he said.