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Local

Billings social-welfare program helps homeless with work, housing

By CHELSI MOY
Of The Gazette Staff

The biggest problem for the Billings homeless community is not enough shelter, said a 40-year-old homeless mother of three. However, if the Billings woman doesn't find work soon, she will be out of the Women and Family Shelter where she has been staying, she said.

"The job is the most important and the most difficult," said the woman.

The homeless mother lost her job at Wal-Mart at the same time the father of her children quit paying child support. She just couldn't keep up with the rent payments and has been homeless for three months, she said.

"It doesn't sound very good when an employer calls up and the first voice they hear is 'Hello, Women and Family Shelter,' " said the woman, who asked not to have her name published because she does not want her ex-husband to know her whereabouts.

It is also frustrating filling out job applications, she said.

"I have no one to ask whether I'm filling them out right, whether I'm giving the right information or is it too much information?"

Starting the beginning of October, a new social-welfare program in Billings should help with this problem. The national Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN) unites local congregations in collaborative efforts to assist homeless families in finding work and permanent or transitional housing.

Karen Olson, director of Family Promise and founder of IHN, spoke to a packed conference room at the Mansfield Health Education Center on Monday as an introduction to the IHN program, which is already under way in Billings. Family Promise is a national organization whose goal is to help low-income families achieve independence. It's the parent organization of IHN.

This will be the first branch of the network in Montana, but Bozeman and Missoula are also developing IHN programs.

Seventeen years ago, Olson said, she had never guessed that offering a sandwich to a homeless woman would change her life.

She probably passed the homeless woman a dozen times on the street while en route to work but never thought of her as anything more than a piece of the New Jersey landscape, she said.

One day, on impulse, Olson bought the woman a sandwich and struck up conversation. She learned the woman was a homeless mother who worked at one time but ran into some bad luck along the way.

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"She was a real person with a name," she said. "That was a pivotal moment."

Olson and her children began taking sandwiches to homeless people at a nearby bus terminal. From there, Olson left her corporate marketing job to dedicate her life helping those who fell between the cracks of the social welfare system - the working poor.

Seventy-two percent of the people in IHN are employed but make barely over minimum wage and receive no benefits, Olson said.

"It's for those people that think, 'I might be homeless but I don't feel like I'm homeless,' " she said. "It shatters all stereotypes. What's driving this is that working parents can't afford to put a roof over their children's head."

There are IHN programs in 32 states and 50 more programs developing around the United States, she said. IHN is unique in that it maintains low expenses by relying on existing community resources, Olson said.

Right now, nine Billings congregations have volunteered to host families on a weekly rotation. The Rev. Kay Tostengard, co-pastor of American Lutheran Church, said that ideally the program aims for 13 host congregations. Each church should be able to host up to five families. Volunteers cook dinner and breakfast for the families while offering educational, housing and employment support.

"It is mobilizing existing resources," Olson said. "Maybe we can do together what one can't do alone."

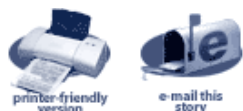
Families are allowed to stay at the church between 5:30 p.m. and 7 a.m. During the day, families are encouraged to use a day center that is being renovated at the Bethlehem Lutheran Church at 40 10th St. W.

The day center will offer shower and laundry facilities. People searching for employment can also use the facility for an address on job applications, and it can be a place where employers can contact them. The center will also hold a full-time IHN director, which the consortium is looking to hire by Aug. 15.

Families admitted to the program will stay under the program's supervision until they find temporary or permanent housing, Tostengard said. In past years, IHN has had an 83 percent success rate, Olson said. Also, IHN is different from other social services in Billings in that the network allows entire families - to stay together in one place and offers more than just food and shelter, Tostengard said.

"I think everyone is worthy of help, but families are the fastest growing segment of homelessness," she said. "It can tear a family apart."

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