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Homeless advocate to speak in city; Local leaders to hear talk on interfaith group

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A national advocate for the homeless will visit Fort Wayne this week to meet with volunteers who run a local network of churches that provide emergency shelter to families.

Karen Olson helped form the Interfaith Hospitality Network in Union County, N.J., in 1986, and since then churches in cities across the country have joined to provide shelter to homeless families. Olson visited Fort Wayne about seven years ago when churches here banded together.

Churches in Lima, Ohio, are working to create an Interfaith Hospitality Network there, and Olson will stop in Fort Wayne after her trip to Ohio, said Roger Reece, director of Fort Wayne's network.

Olson is scheduled to speak at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday at Beacon Heights Church of the Brethren, 2810 Beacon St. Volunteers who work with the network's 22 local churches will attend, and the public is welcome to hear Olson speak, Reece said.

Olson is president of Family Promise, formally known as National Interfaith Hospitality Network.

She is expected to speak about affordable housing and the economic issues that affect low-income families. And she will likely talk about Interfaith Hospitality Networks that are cropping up in cities across the country to help deal with homelessness, Reece said.

The networks typically serve larger cities such as Indianapolis, Sacramento and Denver. But churches in Goshen also formed a network, he said.

Usually the networks begin at the local level when communities realize there is a lack of or a need for emergency shelters for families. Then local clergy band together to solve that problem, Reece said.

Except for Sundays and a few evenings a week, most churches stand empty. The 22 churches in the Fort Wayne network offer food and beds for families a few weeks a year on a rotating basis. During the day, the children go to school and the parents are taken to a day center where staff give them financial counseling and help them find jobs if needed, he said.

Families are asked to stay at the shelter for at least 45 days to give them enough time to get on their feet, Reece said.

Most of the families were renting before coming to the network. The composition of families varies. Sometimes the families are grandparents and grandchildren; other families are led by a single mother, he said.

Network staff members are excited to meet with Olson, who Reece said is an inspiring leader. She also plans to meet with two former network "guests" who are no longer homeless.

Reece believes Olson will be pleasantly surprised by Fort Wayne's network, which has grown in capacity since it first began with just 12 churches, he said.

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