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Ray of hope; Interfaith networks are forming in Manatee and Sarasota counties with a focus on helping homeless families

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"It could happen to any one of us at any time. You've used up your savings, you have a medical or other emergency, and all of a sudden you find you're sleeping in your car," said Diane Berry, board president of Family Promise of Sarasota.

It's the children affected by such situations whom she and numerous volunteers in Sarasota and Manatee counties want to help by forming two nonprofit Family Promise organizations.

Such youth constitute the new face of homelessness, a population that is 45 percent families, according to figures cited by the national Family Promise organization.

The National Coalition for the Homeless reports that homeless families with children are the largest and fastest-growing segment of the homeless population.

Berry says the average age of a homeless person is 9 years, based on figures amassed by her team and the national Family Promise organization.

A new approach

Started in 1986 by Karen Olsen of Union County, New Jersey, Family Promise's mission is "to help low-income families nationwide achieve lasting independence and to redress the underlying causes of poverty and homelessness."

It uses its Interfaith Hospitality Networks to provide comprehensive support in the form of temporary housing, showers, meals, job-placement services, mentoring and links to community resources.

Each network has 10 to 12 host congregations that provide lodging, three meals a day and a welcoming area for the guest families.

Each network also has:

- * A Day Center open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. with a director, a professional social worker and case-management services.

- * Volunteers who cook, play with children, help with homework and interact respectfully and compassionately with guests.

- * Referrals and aid from social-service agencies, which can help find housing, jobs and benefits.

- * Transportation -- a van or set of vans -- that can take guests, bedding and luggage to and from the Day Center and the next host congregation.

"For a lot, this is the first time they were homeless," said Berry. "The ultimate goal is to find them affordable housing -- a real challenge," she said. And "to get them back on their feet and into a life-sustaining situation."

"They're being uprooted from a permanent, stable home situation," said Diana Shoemaker, board president of Family Promise of Manatee. "And they're in environments that in some cases aren't the safest."

"And they're trying to get on with work or school," she said. "It's not the easiest."

Shoemaker, who worked as a Family Promise volunteer in Columbus, Ohio, before moving to Manatee and becoming the full-time education director at Kirkwood Presbyterian Church of Bradenton, said the agency's job is "to provide an environment that's safe and hospitable through this crisis. With a private room, allowing them quiet time together each night."

Neighbors

Family Promise cites four main reasons that so many families live in poverty: lack of affordable housing, jobs that pay low wages and offer minimal benefits, the high cost of child and health care and inaccessible public transportation.

"When I first became homeless, I was struck immediately with terror, a type of terror that almost paralyzed me," Darryl P., who participated in the program in northern Kentucky, told the Family Promise organization. "But when I came to Family Promise with my children, I felt like I'd known these people all my life, and that feeling of terror began to ease..."

"It's a feeling that made me want to get up in the morning and get out there and work real hard to accomplish my goals."

Raleigh R., a former guest in Minneapolis, Minn., told the organization: "The Day Center allows us to get the kind of assistance we need to find places to live, get to doctor appointments and meet personal needs. I don't know what I would have done."

"They're in a situation," said Berry. "They're no different from us."

"We'll be screening out those with mental-health and substance-abuse issues. The volunteers are not equipped to deal with them."

A history of helping

The national Family Promise has operated for 17 years, enlisting 110,000 volunteers, establishing 124 affiliates in 39 states, partnering with 4,500 congregations and lending support to more than 20,000 homeless family members annually -- 58 percent of them children.

Manatee's Shoemaker said in shelters in her county, there are a total of 54 bed spaces available for families. Yet more than 2,000 children were homeless, with no permanent address, within the Manatee County school system, according to 2005 statistics compiled by Project Heart. Those are children living out of hotels, doubled up with relatives or simply living in cars or in makeshift or social-service shelters, Shoemaker said.

In Sarasota County, more than 9,000 people received help from the county's homeless service providers in 2005 -- 2,070, or 23 percent, of those were children, according to the Suncoast Partnership to End Homelessness.

Due to a shortage of beds for homeless families, 465 families with children were determined to be unsheltered by the Sarasota/Manatee 2004 Continuum of Care Plan.

Creating networks locally

"Family Promise came to Sarasota talking to priests, rabbis and pastors" in 2005, Berry said. "I heard of it" in 2006 "and got involved."

Berry's Promise board has since secured six host congregations, has two others that she said are getting ready to sign on and needs five more to become operational.

Participants include Temple Beth Shalom, First Congregational United Church of Christ, St. Wilfred Episcopal Church, Pine Shores Presbyterian Church, St. Boniface Episcopal Church and Ashton Mennonite Church.

Berry's network will get referrals from such agencies as the Salvation Army and Resurrection House.

The network is trying to rent a Day Center; it is looking for a house or a storefront in Sarasota County with two bathrooms, space for two workers and showers, or the potential to install those amenities.

"They can take a (tax) write-off on any property used," she said.

Berry's program would be a strictly volunteer organization, though it would have a director and might eventually have two other employees: a part-time case manager and a part-time van driver, she said.

"We've researched the type of transportation we want to buy, and we already have funding to get them. And we've chosen the beds we want," though the network has yet to buy them as it has nowhere to store them, she said. But the program cannot open without the added host congregations and a Day Center.

"We will be hosting four families at a time, up to 14 people." Her program's goal is to rotate guests out every 60 days. But that's dependent upon the families' finding affordable housing.

The congregations provide the food for the Family Promise program, Berry said, and will cook the morning and evening meals and pack the lunches.

"The volunteers will be with the clients every step of the way," including during their overnight stay, she said.

The program "will be sustained through donations, grants and volunteers," Berry said.

The national Family Promise organization lists the Manatee and Sarasota county networks as "under development" on its Web site at www.familypromise.org.

Berry hopes to officially open the week of April 22.

In Manatee, six host churches are on board: Kirkwood Presbyterian, First Assembly of God, Trinity United Methodist Church, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Harvest United Methodist Church and Palma Sola Presbyterian Church.

"Our next role is to identify congregations in Palmetto," Shoemaker said. "Ideally, we are trying to find them 30 minutes away from the Day Center," which her board has secured already, at Central Christian Church on 15th Street in downtown Bradenton.

"It's a small program. We're going to serve 14 individuals at a time -- three to five families," Shoemaker said. The program would seek to serve up to 100 families per year, Shoemaker said, "if we can get them in and out quickly."

A social worker would assist each family, and volunteers would help them with finding jobs or job skills. Money management and free haircuts are other services that might be provided through volunteers, Shoemaker said.

Her board is still working to find an executive director to work full time with recruiting.

Shoemaker will not cite a target date for officially opening the Manatee agency. But, she said, "I know people want to help, and now we're connecting the need with the aid."

"The faces of homelessness have been the panhandlers and the people on the street," she said. And to potential volunteers and host congregations, "That's scary," she said.

"It's been an educational process to get folks to understand these won't be the people in the program."

When she volunteered with Promise in Ohio, Shoemaker said, "It made people who were homeless very real to me, and the children of the families. ... "I saw the faces of the homeless, and they were children."

INTERESTED?

Contacts: Board President Diana Shoemaker in Manatee: 794-6229. Board President Diane Berry in Sarasota: 809-6789.

Meetings: For Family Promise of Manatee, a community meeting will be at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Central Christian Church, 926 15th St. W., Bradenton.

For Family Promise of Sarasota, community meetings will be at 7 p.m. Monday and on the second Monday of every month at First United Methodist Church, 104 S. Pineapple Ave., Sarasota.

Web site: www.familypromise.org.

A TYPICAL DAY WITH FAMILY PROMISE

Diane Berry, board president of Family Promise of Manatee, outlines a typical night and day for a guest family:

Early evening -- Arrive at host church by Family Promise van.

5:30 p.m. -- Eat family-style dinner. Parents can enjoy some down time; children can interact with volunteers or one another, or do their homework.

Later that evening -- Retire to a private room with cots.

Lights out.

Early next morning -- Eat a breakfast served by volunteers. Receive a prepacked bag lunch.

Daytime (approximately 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.) -- Children are taken to school or to a bus stop. Adults either will go to work or will be taken to the Day Center -- which will serve as the family's contact address -- to look for jobs or housing or to get job training, money management or other support services.