

One woman's plea: 'A home for Christmas'

In this season of hope, the plight of the homeless in the Delaware Valley is not to be forgotten.

By **DEBRA WALLACE**
CORRESPONDENT

On a frigid January night nearly a year ago, 64-year Cindy was moments away from living on the street. She had lost her job at a Bensalem cosmetics factory after four years, and with no money for food or rent, her roommate forced her to leave their apartment.

Not having anyone else to turn to, and nowhere to sleep, she called for help.

"I went to the 7-Eleven near where I used to live, dialed 911 and told the operator: 'I am tired, I am hungry and I'm homeless,'" Cindy recalled, with tears dripping down her face.

"When I made that call I had nothing; all I have wanted all along is a place of my own; a safe and stable home," she said. "Hopefully, in time for Christmas."

Various Philadelphia and suburban organizations estimate there are currently 20,000 women, men and children living in area shelters; and another 6,700 sleeping on the streets. Most recently, this translated to 5,736 homeless people in Philadelphia, 499 in Bucks County and 438 in Montgomery County. It is difficult to get an accurate



PHOTO BY ALEX RODEMICH
Bucks County Emergency Homeless Shelter volunteer Sue Erdosy helps make lunch for the residents. She has been helping out at the shelter for three years.

count, so the numbers are considered to be much higher than estimated.

Several men and women who have been homeless for months say they wish they had a support system to help them get back on their feet.

They talk longingly about jobs, friends, family members and apartments — all in their former lives. The hardest aspect of life on the streets, they agreed, is living-moment-to moment and not knowing what is coming next. Their advice: "Never stop believing that life can get better."

Families are the fastest-growing homeless population, which is why diapers, baby formula and children's clothing are at the top of many shelters' wish lists.

Finding a place in an emergency shelter can be daunting. The police officer on duty bought Cindy some food from the store, and then took her to a temporary placement, one of the three "Code Blue" homeless shelters around Bucks County that are open Dec. 1 to March 31. These shelters provide meals and beds, but residents cannot remain there during

the day, so they head to libraries or churches to stay warm during frigid weather.

The dorms at the Bucks County Emergency Homeless Shelter in Levittown, where Cindy waited to get in after her 911 call, houses 70 to 75 people each night; women and children in one area, and men in another.

Currently, there is a waiting list of 215 people from throughout Bucks County, and it takes about 10 to 12 weeks for a space to open up, explained Kari Howatt, coordinator of the Bucks County Emergency Homeless Shelter, which is a program of the Family Service Association of Bucks County. This "enhanced" shelter, which

serves as a temporary home to its residents, first opened its doors in 1989.

The shelter has housed residents from newborns to those in their 80s. One-third of the residents are under age 18; and most often there are 25 to 30 children living there.

"There are not a lot of other options out there," Howatt said during a recent shelter tour. "Many of our residents end up 'couch surfing' from friend to friend, living in their cars, in the woods or on the streets. They are basically making do until we can help them."

"These are our neighbors and friends. Many of us are merely a paycheck or two

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from being in this situation.” Most residents in the shelter stay about four months, depending on their individual goals. A majority of the residents are searching for a job, looking for housing, and applying for benefits, if they are eligible.

The shelter provides case managers, a nurse-educator, a budget specialist and others to help the residents work on their goals. They encourage residents to save half of their income for rent and security deposits on future apartment rentals.

While residents are there, they live in a dorm and are given a bed, bedding and access to personal items, plus hot showers, three meals a day and three plastic containers kept at the foot of each bed for their belongings.

“There are very few low-income housing opportunities in Bucks County,” explained Howatt. “With high unemployment and underemployment, it becomes very difficult for local people to support their families.”

More than 100 volunteers currently help at the shelter. Some of them date and organize canned goods and other food items, some prepare and serve meals, using mostly food donated by area grocery stores, community groups, religious organizations and individuals.

Sue Erdossy, 67, of Levittown, has been volunteering at the shelter’s commercial kitchen for three years. “I feel like I am doing something worthwhile. I hear their stories, and I am pulling for them; we all hope that they get their lives turned around.”

Although Cindy made some friends, enjoyed having infants and toddlers around most of the time (except the 3 a.m. feeding times), and praised the caring staff, her Christmas wish is for her own apartment.

“The holidays are a sad and difficult time here,” Howatt said. “We make it as special as we can with a

Lending a hand

If you or someone you know is having housing crises — call the Bucks County Housing Link at: 800-810-4434.

For general information about the Bucks County Emergency Shelter contact: Kari Howatt, at 215-949-1727, ext. 110, or khowatt@fsabc.org.

The shelter accepts in-kind donations of nonperishable food, first aid/personal care items and cleaning supplies. View the current wish list at www.fsabc.org/wish-list-shelter.

Volunteers are needed in the office, food prep and sorting donations. Contact Ellen Vinson at 215-757-6916, ext. 202, or volunteer@fsabc.org.

For further information about Project HOME, go to: www.projecthome.org or call 215-232-7272. On Facebook go to: fb.com/projecthome.

sit-down meal, a holiday shop to pick out gifts; and Santa comes for the children on Christmas morning. But let’s be honest, no one wants to live in a shelter, especially at Christmas.”

Sister Mary Scullion, a Roman Catholic nun in Philadelphia, has been involved with service work and advocacy for the homeless since 1978.

She is the co-founder and executive director of Project HOME in Philadelphia, a formidable non-profit group that provides housing, opportunities for employment, medical care and education to homeless and low-income people in Philadelphia.

The mission of Project HOME is to empower adults, children and families to break the cycle of homelessness and poverty.

On a recent Monday evening, she was surrounded by several dozen residents of St. Elizabeth’s, a supportive housing program for formerly homeless men who were sharing their stories of previous despair and newfound hope. The sign on the wall read: “Compassion. Perseverance. Kindness,” principles that are vital to everyone in need.

“Any day on the street when you are homeless is dehumanizing and destructive, regardless of the weather,” Scullion explained. “But bitter cold weather

exacerbates the situation.”

For Scullion, the problem of homelessness is all-encompassing, and involves, jobs, job training, education, advocacy and support.

“Each of us needs to work with any and all organizations to address the urgent needs of people living on the streets in the winter, summer, fall and spring,” she said. “The solution to ending homelessness lies within all of us.”

Scullion said it is vitally important that the communities establish “welcoming places for young people to learn, to play and to work, so they can grow up to be healthy and functioning adults and leaders. I believe that is all of our jobs.”

Cindy has come a long way since last Christmas. “Last year I was feeling very down on myself and I didn’t think I would ever get to the point where I am right now. Through my hard work and the support I received from the case workers and my friends, I was given hope, and every milestone I made was a steppingstone to get me to where I am today. It was rough, but it was a learning experience that has made me a lot stronger today than I was a year ago.”

Three weeks ago, Cindy received the phone call she and her friend, who had also been homeless and lived in different shelters, were waiting for — they were approved for a two-bedroom apartment in Bensalem, and moved in the same week.

She knew that leaving the emergency shelter after nearly a year would be bitter-sweet, because of the rapport she developed with many of the women and children there. “When you are living like that, you bond with people and start friendships. It is hard to say good-bye. I became very close to a lot of the women.”

But she knows life has changed in a positive way. “The apartment is beautiful; it is absolutely wonderful. I am so happy,” Cindy said, with tears of joy streaming down her face. “It is so special to have my own place to lay my head down at night and to know it is really mine. My Christmas wish came true!”

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