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Some refuse to shun homeless

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Advocates say there is no one answer.

St. Vincent de Paul was stuck between a rock and a hard place. The Roman Catholic charity was trying to help the homeless, but neighbors complained that its clients were not only noisy and scary but that they urinated and defecated on surrounding property.

That battle didn't take place in December, when the charity took heat for allowing homeless people to set up a tent city on its land. It happened 10 years ago.

Back then, Bishop Robert Lynch blamed downtown redevelopment hopes for the pressure put on the charity, which eventually moved to a more isolated location.

But advocates for the homeless say the NIMBY syndrome Lynch spoke about 10 years ago persists. Most people want the less fortunate to be helped, just "not in my back yard."

While the past few weeks have been stressful for St. Vincent de Paul and other agencies that help the homeless, they say much has been gained from the disturbing and potentially volatile episode.

"It created a new public awareness," said Patricia Waltrich, public affairs manager for St. Vincent de Paul.

"It just exposed the problem," said Sam Infanzon, a pastor who heads the St. Petersburg Dream Center, which scouts the city's downtown six nights a week offering blankets, coffee, sandwiches and rolls to those living on the streets. "Personally, I think it's a shame they had to go through all of this to get well-needed attention."

Agencies, which normally don't work as one, organized a "homeless expo" near St. Vincent de Paul, handing out housing vouchers, rounding up jobs, providing medical care and putting some tent city residents on buses home to family and friends.

"We all got together as one big family," said Sophie Sampson, executive director of St. Vincent de Paul in St. Petersburg. "A lot of people say they want to be homeless. They don't."

'Need to be more shelters'

Those who work with the homeless say a one-size-fits-all solution doesn't exist. The population's problems could be financial, drug or alcohol addiction, or mental illness. That makes providing services difficult.

"There need to be more shelters of various kinds," said Jane Egbert, executive director of the St. Petersburg Free Clinic. "There is not one solution that is appropriate for everyone."

The Free Clinic offers transitional housing for men and women and an overnight shelter for men. Its Women's Residence, with enclosed porches, flower beds and patios, is indistinguishable from other residences on a block near St. Petersburg's downtown.

"The program works very well for those that are sincere about moving on and getting on their feet," said Susan Canty, director of the women's program.

The program has room for up to 20 women in two houses. They can stay for up to six months if they follow the rules and remain employed. Its successes include a graduation from Eckerd College and completion of paralegal studies.

Sharon Gonzalez, a volunteer case worker at the Dream Center, is overwhelmed by calls from people begging for a place to live as affordable housing becomes more scarce.

"They don't care where it is. People come in thinking that they are going to get help a lot faster by sitting in front of me," she said, tears welling up in her eyes. "I dread coming in. I go home at night and half the time, I can't sleep."

A shower and clean clothes

ASAP is on a side street near Bayfront and All Children's hospitals, with one discreet sign showing its purpose.

The homeless find it mostly by word of mouth. They start gathering before dawn to be assigned numbers entitling them to sit on plastic chairs in a fenced, uncovered yard for a hot drink and a bite to eat.

They also can shower and change into clean clothing. The clothes they shed - including underwear - are washed for anyone who shows up the next day.

Michael McQuay turned to ASAP for help countless times during his 10 to 15 years on the streets. Now he works at the center as a full-time employee. He comes in, turns on the morning coffee and gets the kitchen ready. Later, he'll do the wash.

The job, which he has had for about a year, pays about \$252 and keeps him centered.

"Once you take that step up the ladder, you better do your damned best to stay there," he said.

Like ASAP, the Dream Center gets many clients through the street grapevine. The center offers church services, food, toiletries, clothing, and referrals for jobs and other assistance. Those wandering in during the day might get a cup of soup or macaroni, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and clean, dry clothes and blankets.

Anything helps.

"This is a terrible life," said Sampson in her St. Vincent de Paul office, a block from where homeless men huddled in front of rain-drenched tents Monday morning. "If we could give them a place to live ..."

Times Staff Writer Jon Wilson contributed to this story. Waveney Ann Moore can be reached at 892-2283 or moore@sptimes.com.

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO, SCOTT KEELER - Times: The St. Petersburg Dream Center offers coffee, sweets and blankets downtown six nights a week. PHOTO, SCOTT KEELER - Times: A van run by the St. Petersburg Dream Center, one of many agencies offering help, doles out coffee and rolls. (Ran Page 3, Neighborhood Times)

Credit: SPECIAL REPORT: HOMELESS IN PINELLAS; THE HELP; Times Staff Writer

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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PHOTO, SCOTT KEELER - Times: The St. Petersburg Dream Center offers coffee, sweets and blankets downtown six nights a week. PHOTO, SCOTT KEELER - Times: A van run by the St. Petersburg Dream Center, one of many agencies offering help, doles out coffee and rolls. (Ran Page 3, Neighborhood Times)

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