

Poverty amidst plenty in Oakland County

This is the first of a two-part series on Oakland County's homeless.

By Greg Kowalski
staff writer

He's 21. She's 19 and pregnant. They're not married, but they are together. He was an abused child and left home at age 15. She "had a good family, pretty average," she said.

Now both are homeless. He's looking for work and "we plan to get our act together and do whatever we can," he said.

For now, however, they are using the services of the South Oakland Shelter and staying at the various places in the county.

It's ironic in a way. Houses worth hundreds of thousands of dollars stand within walking distance of the cots and sheets of people who don't have enough money to buy lunch.

Gov. John Engler visited Southfield Thursday to announce a new partnership between the state and the Salvation Army to provide assistance to the people such as this couple who are among the growing numbers of homeless and hungry people living in metro Detroit.

The young couple asked to be left nameless but held a bright attitude.

"SOMEDAY, SOMETHING positive will happen. It's got to," he said.

Andy Milne, 31, was less reluctant to discuss his situation.

He's from the Walled Lake area and just got out of the hospital. He spends his days seeking a job or drifting.

"It's pretty boring. I'm looking for work, but work doesn't seem to be looking for me," he tries to keep an

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upbeat attitude.

Milne has no family, "at least none that would be supportive of me," he said. As for the future, he said he has no plans.

Milne and the young couple are representative of the homeless that seek space through the South Oakland Shelter program, which encompasses 16 participating churches and a synagogue in Birmingham, Rochester, Southfield, Troy and West Bloomfield and one area business — the Michigan National Bank Corp. headquarters in Farmington Hills. A total of 50 sites are used throughout Oakland County.

They each open their doors for a week, providing space for people in need. The homeless get a place to sleep, snacks, a bagged lunch and a ride to wherever they need to go for the day.

WHO ARE THEY and where do they come from?

They're mostly men, age 30 to 39. But the homeless profile is wide-ranging. Men, women, boys and girls all fit into the picture.

SOS statistics from the August 1990-91 fiscal year show that the system accommodated 683 people, mostly men. Of the total figure, 171 were women and 75 were children,

meaning about one-third were women and children. They came from such communities as Ann Arbor, Birmingham, Ferndale, New Baltimore, Madison Heights and Hazel Park, among others.

And they keep coming. "Homelessness isn't something new or something that just happens in winter," said SOS director Lillian Melville. "It's a year-round problem."

She, two full-time staffers and three part-timers operate the service that was founded in 1986 at St. Mary Catholic Church in Royal Oak. "Someone came up with the idea of having shelters in churches, and they ran with it," Melville said.

SINCE THEN, the program has grown with the need so that it operates nearly year-round and next year will probably be operating daily. This year, the program operated year-round except for two weeks in August.

"We would like someday to have a permanent, 24-hour facility," Melville said.

Why do they become homeless? It's a tough question.

Most homeless people that Melville have worked with "have a lack of planning, a lack of life skills. They just don't know how to cope."

"Life skills" are the traits we all learn, often indirectly, from our parents, said Melville. "It's something that's inadvertently taught. No one sits down and tells you this is the way things are going to be done," Melville said.

MENTAL ILLNESS often figures in many cases of the homeless, Melville said. Paranoia — the irrational fear that someone is watching and following you — is common among many homeless.

"Paranoia is a horrible thing to live with," said Melville. That fear causes some people to leave shelters and choose to live alone on the streets. They feel that people in the shelters are "out to get them."

Margaret Marsh, who is one of the directors of the shelter at Birmingham Unitarian Church, said the shelter operation, "is an excellent program."

She added, "personally think this is what churches should be doing."

Thursday: A homeless man is on track to a new life.



STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

Homeless men, women and children — like Quentin Caldwell, above — spent their nights last week at the Birmingham Unitarian Church, which hosted the South Oakland Shelter. Sheets hanging behind them divide the sleeping quarters.

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Students win writing awards

A record number of six student awards were given by the Oakland University Division of Continuing Education and Detroit Women Writers (DWW) at the 30th Annual Writers' Conference held Oct. 18-19 on campus, Rochester.

Students were judged on their writing samples.

Winners were Timothy J. Miller,

Warren, Alleia L. Cunningham-Sampson, Southfield, and Kathy Jean Williams, Port Sanilac, all OU students; Susan Noguera, Livonia, a senior at Madonna University; Timothy P. White, Detroit, a junior at the University of Michigan-Dearborn; and Cheryl Shrenan, Dearborn, a junior at Southwestern Michigan College.

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