

Churches to host homeless

BY REBECCA WALDMAN STAFF WRITER

Oakland County's roving homeless shelter will be taking up residence in churches around Birmingham, West Bloomfield, Bloomfield Township and Farmington Hills for the rest of 1994.

Every week between now and New Year's Day, the South Oakland Shelter (SOS) has booked seven-day stays for 30 homeless men, women and children in places like Bloomfield Township's Nativity Episcopal Church, Farmington Hills' Orchard United Methodist Church and Birmingham's Northbrook Presbyterian Church, to name a few.

The organization's headquarters is in Royal Oak, but it hasn't had a permanent place to house its clients since it began in December 1985. Even so, volunteering churches and synagogues have been clamoring to offer their space in increasing numbers.

"SOS has gotten real popular," said Sheila McEntee, a member of Birmingham Unitarian Church in West Bloomfield and coordinator of its SOS week. "Everybody wants SOS in their organization. It's a well-managed program, and I think most sites that have participated in it have never had a bad incident."

Only 30 people can be taken into the program at a time, and they are carefully screened by SOS's four-member staff for substance abuse and other serious problems.

"Usually, I promise (each site) 25 nice guys and two stinkers," joked Lillian Melville, executive director of SOS. "But there are no drugs and no alcohol."

When SOS began nine years ago, it could get accommodations for clients only 17 weeks out of the year. Now, all 52 weeks are booked by early January, and sites sign up on a first-come, first-served basis.

Some sites vary the time of year they provide shelter. Increasingly, however, sites are organizing their calendars so that they take their turn around the same time each year.

That's because, in part, each site needs between 100 and 150 volunteers throughout its SOS week, working in several categories of jobs. People are needed to serve dinner and breakfast, pack lunches, transport clients to and from work or other places they need to go and serve on night watch as clients sleep.

"We're always (open to SOS) around Christmastime, because some members have that time off to participate," said Janet Forgius, SOS week coordinator at St. Hugo of the Hills Church in Bloomfield Hills. "We find that's the best time for us, because of the availability of certain areas on the premises normally occupied by our school."

SOS week at St. Hugo's is organized by the church's Christian Service Commission, which Forgius chairs. The commission begins recruiting volunteers in November for the late December event.

"It's a big undertaking. We need up to 100 volunteers for that week," Forgius added.

"It's a rewarding thing to do from the church's perspective," said McEntee, whose church will



Helping hand: Lillian Melville is executive director of South Oakland Shelter, which helps homeless people find temporary shelter.

host SOS Nov. 13-20.

"For the church, it's a transformative event. We have it in the social hall, where services are (held). Sunday the 13th we put away chairs (after worship) and start setting up racks for separating the women's sleeping area. Sunday the 20th is especially hard, because we have to be set up for services by 8 a.m."

Still, site members gain a lot from volunteering, McEntee said.

"People in the church are very conscious that their church is trying to help. It raises their self level. They may start off serving food the first year, because that's what they're comfortable with. They get more involved in following years, because they know that people in the program

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