

M.E.A.L.S. from page A13

There are so many important and vital causes in the community. There are so many things that people can always use an extra hand on. It's always easy to look at problems and not at solutions. We need to find an appropriate place for them.

"All we're asking is for five hours a week in community service. That's not a lot to ask," Truscott said.

MEALS activists also argue that the program currently does not offer host agencies financial support for screening, training, liability or supervising volunteers. Nor does it make provisions for clothing, transportation or meals above the monthly food stamp allotment for these individuals.

"One hundred and twenty dollars is all they get," said Sister Rita Mary Olszewski, RSM, of Auburn Hills, a MEALS activist who chairs the Catholic Caucus of Southeastern Michigan. "There is not 50 cents more to have a cup of coffee."

Many current recipients live in public housing and may be one step from homelessness. Others who fit the term "able-bodied" may have criminal records, drug additions or a lack of communication skills.

According to the governor's press secretary, however, "We believe that there are enough options out there for them that it should be a huge burden. There are a lot of programs out there if they're willing to ask for help."

"Many of these people are not able-bodied. That's a myth," said Mary Carry, co-chair of Pax Christi Michigan and coordinator of Orchard Lake-based Pence and National Priorities Center in Oakland County.

Such programs help "to bring some self-worth and self-respect to people when they feel they're giving back," Bouchard said. "Why can't they see it as an opportunity to bring individuals who may be disadvantaged in some way back into the community?"

Those exempt from the new law include individuals medically certified as physically or mentally incapable of working, pregnant women, regular participants in a substance abuse treatment program, individuals on unemployment compensation and individuals responsible for the care of the incapacitated.

Members of MEALS are also concerned about food-stamp recipients finding gainful employment.

"Five and a half percent of people throughout the country who

want jobs now can't find them. Where will the new jobs come from?" asked William Carry, a retired engineer who volunteers at the Lighthouse in Pontiac to repair cars for the needy free of charge. "And that number only counts people actively looking for work. The number of people really unemployed is much larger."

The group also contends that the food stamp dollar turns over three to six times in the local economy. The loss of the stamps could invariably affect jobs in the retail food industry.

Even if the new welfare program would meet with success, Carry said, "There will still be a substantial number of people who will fall through the cracks."

They're people right at the edge of being able to function in society. Why don't we take the risks with people who are already comfortable, who have funds?"

"Over time, somehow we have twisted the notion that government has the right to take hard earned money from working individuals and give it to those who choose to do nothing," Bouchard said. "There are solutions to problems, if you're willing to find them. Let's look for solutions, not problems."

"We are all human beings. We are all responsible," said Olszewski. "The governors' responsibility is for the common good. It's not to be abdicated."

"Our request is not unheard of. It's very reasonable," added Tyson.



Maggie Tyson



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