

Nativity's Homeless Weekend

How we got started:

About 10 years ago Sharon McPhail, who was then on the City Council, had an idea that if every church in Detroit, be it a huge cathedral or a storefront church, took as many people as they could for one night a year, then we would have no homeless in Detroit. Our Parish Council agreed that this was a great idea and Nativity would house people for two nights in the winter through this One Night Shelter Initiative. Since then Nativity has hosted the homeless one winter weekend a year. It is quite an undertaking!

Where do we connect with the homeless and how long do they stay:

On Friday night, we pick-up 25 people, usually 17 men and 8 women because of our sleeping arrangements, from the Neighborhood Service Organization at Mack and Third, serve them dinner, house them for the evening, prepare lunches, serve breakfast and take them back to the NSO for the day. We do the same thing on Saturday night and often have a number of our Friday night guests return.

How much help is needed:

Prior to the weekend we collect new socks, hats, gloves, scarves, washcloths, plus small size toiletry items such as toothpaste, toothbrushes, shampoo, lotion and Kleenex. We make up toiletry kits for each of our guests. Some people do multiple things, but it probably takes about 150 people to make things run smoothly. Prior to the weekend our toiletry kits are put together and on the Sunday before the shelter our Sunday School Students from grade 7 through high school bring the sheets, blankets and other donations to the basement. The next thing is setting up the night before our guests arrive. This takes about 15 people putting up cots, setting sheets, blankets and toiletry kits on each cot and arranging the eating area. About 25 people “bring a dish” for dinner each night, another 6 or more serve and clean up after dinner, about 6 people come each day to cook breakfast, serve it and clean-up. We also have about 20 people on 4 hour shifts that monitor each night. This means being around if someone needs anything, going upstairs to let smokers back in and generally ensuring that all is well. Clean-up takes 4 or 5 people on Saturday and 15 or so on Sunday. Finally, another 6 or 8 people take home the used sheets and blankets and bring them back clean to be stored for the next year. There are lots of jobs, big or small, but with everyone contributing what they can, we are blessed!

Do we have any trouble?

People always ask “do you have any problems when you have the homeless?” The answer is “no, we really don't.” Sure, once we had to call 911 when someone had an asthma attack and once we took someone to the emergency room but overall, we have had very few issues and were able to handle them. One VERY cold Sunday morning the bus wouldn't start and we had to ask people coming to 8:30 Mass if they would mind driving a few people back to the NSO. In true Nativity fashion, we had no problem getting enough people to transport our 25 guests.

One rather “funny” story: if you recall the year Detroit hosted the Super Bowl, the news media was talking about how Detroit was busing their homeless out of the city so things would look better to the people from out of town. Unrelated to Super Bowl, we happened to be hosting the homeless that weekend. One of the newscasters followed our bus from the NSO back to Nativity, which we didn't know, and wanted to know why we had taken the homeless that weekend. When we said we had been doing it for a number of years and really had no significant problems, they interviewed a few people, took pictures and left. Needless to say because it was a “good” story, we never ended up on the news!

Why we continue (besides the great need):

This continues to be a rewarding experience for the people of Nativity and we hope for our homeless guests. It is humbling and a gift to us to visit with our guests at breakfast, dinner and in the evening. Sharing life stories, a movie or the current sporting scores reminds us how much we all have in common. We encourage everyone to come serve a meal, monitor, eat a meal with our guests or just stop by and say hello. You may be surprised with what you learn!