

A long-term mission to serve the homeless

Washington City Mission gives food, shelter, renewal

By Zak Koeske

Since 1941, the Washington City Mission has been serving homeless men, women and children of that community by a process that promotes renewal.

Founded by local minister and businessman the Rev. Burt McCausland, the Christian faith-based homeless rehabilitation shelter originated in a modest storefront that acted as a soup kitchen and chapel for those suffering during the Great Depression.

Nowadays the nonprofit, located between the county jail and police department, serves as a food distribution center and shelter. It can accommodate up to 56 men and 36 women and children per night between the organization's primary location and a second building opened in 2002, the Avis Arbor Women's Shelter.

There is such need that many are turned away. An earlier plan to expand was halted because a city ordinance restricts the expansion of all such facilities.

Due to its location, the mission frequently provides recently released inmates with food, clothing, bus tickets and a chance to make phone calls, said Shirley Fierro, director of development.

It offers free preventive, primary and urgent health care to the shelter's residents and many uninsured members of the Washington community, via its Arbuckle Medical Clinic.

Established in 1993, the clinic works with local addiction treatment centers, assisted-care homes and institutions.

To accomplish this, the organization offers a 30-day transient program for individuals who need time and space to get their life and affairs in order. After 30 days, if a resident decides to remain at the mission and space is available, he or she can enter a 180-day program.

That program allows residents to participate in faith-centered rehabilitation, which involves attending chapel programs, Bible studies and participation in intensive individual and group counseling on topics such as the causes of homelessness and addiction with an emphasis on mental health and spiritual restoration.

Although core courses in gaining life skills and competencies are mandatory, participation in religious activities is not required.

But, according to Ms. Fierro,

the religious services are widely embraced.

"People usually find that the folks around them have learned to love the Lord, and the staff has learned to love the Lord. Many times it's just what they needed to find their way in the Lord. We don't make them do church. It's just a natural progression out of what they find here," Ms. Fierro said.

In order to speed a transition to independent living, the mission offers classes on job training, time management and conflict resolution. Residents also participate in a Work Readiness program where they assist in the organization's daily operation as janitors, cooks, clerks and servers.

Residents who have successfully completed the first phase of the transition to independent living may choose to work for outside employers while continuing to receive mission services, including shelter. Eventually, they can move into the NextStep housing program; once they reach a savings goal, they are assisted in shifting to independent living.

More than half of the mission funding comes from charitable donations, foundation grants, churches and a small amount of government funding.

The mission also operates four Hidden Treasures thrift stores where donated items are sold at bargain prices in the nearby Canonsburg, Donora, Washington and Waynesburg. Larger items, including outdoor and sporting equipment, building supplies and electronics, are sold at the Washington-based Last Chance Bargain Center. The proceeds of these sales help to fund the organization.

Last year, the mission brought in about \$2.8 million, said Ms. Fierro.

Although the mission has continued to expand over the years, facilities are not large enough to accommodate all of those in need. During April, May and June, the mission turned away 122 women and 56 children seeking shelter and services. As a result, the board of directors approved the construction of an additional facility for women and children on their West Wheeling Street property. However, the project has been halted because an ordinance passed by the city of Washington on March 5 restricts the physical expansion of all homeless shelters, rescue missions and charity dining facilities.

The mission is gathering facts to decide whether to appeal the decision.

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