

## Slow economy brings rise in homeless youth

Jerry Filteau | Apr. 27, 2009



People take part in Covenant House's annual candlelight vigil in New York's Times Square Nov. 20. The event focused attention on the plight of homeless youths. (CNS/Courtesy of Covenant House/Hilary Duffy)

WASHINGTON -- The current recession has brought a sharp rise in homelessness among young people and families, said Catholic and interfaith shelter providers interviewed recently by *NCR*.

"In the last few months we have seen a sharp uptick" in the number of youths seeking shelter, said Kevin M. Ryan, new president of Covenant House, an international Catholic organization that serves some 70,000 teenagers and young adults across the United States and in several other countries in the Americas.

"A lot of young people had a frayed safety net," he said, and the surge in Covenant House's clientele "is a reflection of the economic collapse catching up with the poor."

"For the first time in history we are running hard up to capacity," he said.

Ryan, who was formally installed as president and CEO of Covenant House March 30, spoke with *NCR* during an April visit to Washington to meet with White House officials on the growing homelessness crisis that is emerging with the nation's rise in unemployment and continuing economic recession.

Covenant House -- which has facilities for homeless youths in 15 U.S. cities plus five abroad (two in Canada, one each in Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua) -- is the largest faith-based shelter for homeless youth in the world.

Ryan said the economic crisis has started to change Covenant House's clientele from runaways and other "street kids" who often are dealing with family problems and possibly have been caught up in the sex trade to youths forced into homelessness by more strictly economic conditions.

Already the impact has been "catastrophic in Latin America," he said.



“Those trends typically take longer to move north,” he said, but in recent months

the increase in demand has hit Covenant House facilities in Toronto and Vancouver, Canada, and in New York, New Jersey and elsewhere across the United States. “There’s been fully a one-third increase” in youths seeking Covenant House help in New York City this year, he said.

“I’m deeply worried about this,” he added, saying that the “danger out there for homeless kids” should be a “clarion call to civic associations and faith-based organizations to work in partnership” to meet the challenge.

When asked to offer a specific example of the changing climate, Ryan said that just a couple of days earlier “I had dinner with one of our kids” who came from an intact family where a parental job loss led to eviction. The family had to go to a shelter. The boy’s younger siblings could be accommodated, but “there was not space” for the older boy, who had just turned 18, he said, so the 18-year-old came to Covenant House as an alternative to the shelter.

Ryan said that in his White House meetings he talked with Obama administration staff “about shoring up the safety net” for the new homeless created by the economic downturn of the past year.

Several residents at the Covenant House crisis center in Washington described their unsuccessful efforts to get out of homelessness by finding employment during the current economic downturn. They sounded upbeat and hopeful, but the stories they told were of struggle and difficulty.

“It’s very hard out here,” said Corey, 23. “Right now I couldn’t get a job. I’ve been putting in applications. All I can do is keep on striving.”

By the reporter’s agreement with Covenant House, the youths interviewed gave only their first names.

Terrence, 20, said, “I got kicked out of school when I was 16 and I went to the Woodland Job Corps in Laurel, Md., where I obtained most of my GED [high school equivalency certification] except for the math part, and got my certificate in the culinary arts.” But then he went “on the road to destruction,” drinking heavily, smoking marijuana and ending up in jail, he said. When he was released three months ago, a shelter referred him to Covenant House, and now he is working to complete the math part of his GED.

He said that when college graduates are vying for entry-level jobs in a recessionary economy, it makes it even harder for those without college credentials to find a job.

Tiffany, also 22, said she ran away from home when she was 16 and got her first place of her own when she was 18.

“When I was 21 years old I was evicted because I ended up being pregnant. I’d switched jobs, which wasn’t a

good thing -- they [her new employers] didn't have maternity leave and they didn't tell me so. In my ninth month they finally told me, and I didn't have the funds to pay my rent for the rest of the month, so I was evicted.?

She said her son had just turned 1 a couple of days before she was interviewed. Since his birth, the jobs I've been looking for or would have preferred, it seems like it's very hard to get it because of the economy. So that's why I've just enrolled myself into a career school.? Tiffany said she has her high school diploma and is working for a future career in health care.

?I agree with Terrence, it's very hard to find a job,? she said. ?My mother made over \$40 an hour, and her job was [eliminated when her company went] bankrupt.?

She said Covenant House has provided ?stability -- I don't have to worry where I'm going tomorrow? as she tries to put her life in order.

Corey said he had been leasing a room from an uncle until recently, when he was told to move ?because one of my cousins was going to be moving back into his house.? In Covenant House for the past two months, he said he is working on his GED, which he hopes to get in June, and getting training in construction carpentry.

Jessica, 22, said she had been living with her grandmother, ?but there was nothing but negativity and she wanted to put me out. ... I've been here for about two-and-a-half months.? She said she has three children ?but only one is here with me.?

De Andrea said, ?I grew up in foster care, and when I was sent home to my mom, we never picked things up from when I left. So we don't have much of a relationship.? She had a job with the D.C. Metro subway system, she said, but when she lost that, she got behind on her rent and had to move out at the end of 2008.

She moved back in with her mother while trying to earn enough to get a new apartment, she said, but their relationship quickly got strained, ?so she told me it would be best for me to leave.?

?Covenant House is the only shelter that has assistance other than just a bed and a place to stay,? she said. She said she is in the house's ?Rites of Passage? transitional living program, which helps participants move from housing dependency to living on their own.

Jocelyn Harris, Washington Covenant House communications director, said the Washington program provides housing for about 72 persons -- youths generally aged 18 to 24 and their children, almost all preschool-age, who form up to a third of the residents. The program includes daycare for the children so that the young adult residents can pursue schooling, job training and other activities that will eventually lead them out of homelessness and into independent living.

While Covenant House facilities across the country focus specifically on homeless teenagers and young adults, other agencies in the Washington area -- a region generally considered pretty recession-proof in comparison with other parts of the country -- are also reporting higher rates of homelessness, especially affecting young adults and families with children.

?We're seeing the middle class falling,? said Dora Carter, program director of Angel's Watch Regional Shelter for women, a Washington archdiocesan Catholic Charities house in southern Maryland that houses women made homeless by spousal abuse, joblessness or other factors. She said that Angel's Watch has recently admitted more middle-class women who are facing homelessness for economic factors.

SOME (So Others Might Eat), an interfaith organization in Washington that focuses at least as much now on

homelessness as on hunger, has launched a major drive in the past couple of years to increase transitional and longer-term housing to meet the growing demand of people with no homes.

Fr. John Adams, SOME's executive director, said the agency served about 400,000 meals last year, about a 10 percent increase over the year before, but its major capital expenditures in the past couple of years have been in affordable transitional or long-term housing for the homeless -- an area SOME's board of directors decided was a top priority in view of the rising rate of homelessness in the area. The board set a goal of 1,000 new housing units "and we're halfway to that goal" despite a significant drop in funding in the past several months because of the recession, he said.

Adams, a priest of the Washington archdiocese, has been with SOME for the past 30 years. He said with the unemployment rate rising above 9 percent recently, "of course hunger goes up, along with the number of people going homeless."

Before it started on a major housing expansion, he said, SOME had 203 single-occupancy units and 14 units for families. Since then it has opened 54 additional units for individuals and 46 more for families. Despite the recent expansion, Adams said, "all of our waiting lists now are filled. I just tried to get someone into single occupancy the other day, and the place was absolutely full, with a waiting list."

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