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We must make room for the homeless

Mary Ann McGivern | Jun. 14, 2013 NCR Today

St. Louis faces a new housing crisis. Some downtown businesses want the city to shut down the New Life Evangelistic Center. New Life houses more than 100 people most nights, mostly men. During the day, they beg on the streets, sit on park benches and get warm (or cool) in the public library reading rooms.

The city has worked hard for the last five years to end homelessness. The mayor has adopted a "housing first" policy that says people need housing before they deal with addictions and find jobs. There are housing programs for veterans, people with felony convictions and people who just don't have homes. But there are not enough programs, not enough housing.

One aspect of the problem is that St. Louis City is its own county, surrounded by half a dozen counties in Missouri and Illinois, none of which have embraced the "housing first" policy. Only one has a few shelters. Mostly, this ring of counties sends their homeless to the city, sometimes under threat of arrest if they don't go.

Another aspect is that city leaders claim homelessness no longer exists in the city, that the problem has been solved. When we opened the Catholic Worker in 1977, we were the first shelter for women and children. The phone rang with shelter requests at least seven times every day. Community members say the rate is higher today despite shelters, some permanent housing and a housing clearinghouse the homeless are supposed to call. New Life meets a need.

New Life can be a crowded and scary place to stay. It is loud and poor. Services are limited. But as long as there are homeless, I will sing the praises of New Life. They give whoever comes at least three nights of shelter, enough for some to figure out a next step.

Maybe we should ask the complaining businesses to pay for New Life services like job placement and transportation to interviews and health clinics. It might be cheaper in the long run for local business to operate some recycling and warehouse companies that hire the homeless than to close New Life. As long as the economy is so bad for the poor, people who have nowhere else to go will come to the city. We need to make room for them.

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