

# Current events spark interest of homeless

Aaron Wiggins may be homeless, but it doesn't mean he isn't interested in discussing current events.

Mr. Wiggins is among the six to 10 individuals who come weekly to St. Vincent de Paul's Beans & Bread Outreach Center in Fells Point, ready to discuss the issues of the day.

"A lot of the missions and shelters in the city don't want you to be near their building until they are ready to let you in for the night, because the neighbors don't want to look at us," Mr. Wiggins said. "They want us to be invisible, like we don't exist. At least here..., at this group, I don't feel like I'm invisible. I feel like what I have to say matters."

On a recent weekday, he and nine other men discussed laws regulating food and shelter to the homeless. It was an opportunity for the men to engage in intellectual dialogue while venting their frustrations with a system many believe strips them of their dignity.

Providing the homeless with a dignified forum was one of the main reasons Beans & Bread started the group last April, said Kathleen Spain, director of the outreach center.

"We saw the group as another way to engage clients, since it would be an opportunity to discuss current events, something that most of us do at work or at home," said Ms. Spain.

University of Maryland Baltimore County student Lisa Maslar, an intern who expects to graduate this spring, currently heads the program.

"I'm the facilitator for this group, but I feel like I learn so much from the homeless clients who come to our meetings," Ms. Maslar said. "I hadn't had much exposure to the homeless population before. I've found that a lot of the myths and stereotypes

aren't true, at least for the people I've met through my experiences so far."

"I think our clients have benefited because they help determine the topics," Ms Spain said. "So, if something's going on in the community, the facilitator can do some research and bring back any information to the next session."

Daniel Taylor is a homeless man who has attended several of the current events group meetings, including a September forum where officials from the state of Maryland unveiled a 10-year plan to eradicate homelessness in and around the city of Baltimore.

"This is something that affects me directly," Mr. Taylor said. "A group like this makes me feel like maybe I can be a part of a solution and not part of the problem."