

Ellicott City parish hosts Cold Weather Shelter for Howard County's homeless population

ELLCOTT CITY - St. Paul Church in Ellicott City hosted its annual Cold Weather Shelter outreach to those in need in Howard County Jan. 2-8. It was the 13th consecutive year parish volunteers provided shelter, home-cooked meals, laundry and transportation to men, women and children experiencing homelessness.

The "Cold Weather Shelter Program" is an initiative of Grassroots Crisis Intervention Center, a non-profit organization based in Columbia. Grassroots provides 24-hour crisis intervention services, emergency and transitional shelter and communication education in Howard County.

According to Kathy Piet, Grassroots Cold Weather Shelter manager, the program was created 15 years ago. Sixteen faith communities currently serve as host. While St. Paul is the only Catholic church in Howard County participating, its volunteers include many from Church of the Resurrection, with which it shares a school.

The program spans 19 weeks, starting the week of Thanksgiving until the last week of March. Grassroots provides sleeping mats, sheets and bedding for guests, as well as a staff member on the shelter premises, during the evening and overnight.

"We tend to have the same group of people (throughout the winter)," Piet said. "We had up to 27 people already. Some have moved on, and some have found shelter. Some have gone other places."

Long-time parishioner Gloria Baer is at the helm of the St. Paul effort, involved in that ministry since the parish started hosting the program in 2004. This year, St. Paul hosted 10 men, six women and three small children.

Baer said the week-long program involves close to 100 volunteers and an efficient system.

"The guests come in at 6 (p.m.), and we have the volunteers downstairs in the kitchen preparing the meals for the night," Baer said.

Several volunteers prepare and donate meals. Volunteers have the opportunity to eat dinner with the guests.

St. Paul provides a laundry service. Parishioner Kathleen Waldner has been the self-appointed "laundry ministry chairman" for the program since its inception. Guests know her as the "laundry lady," and she draws from a pool of about 16 volunteers who pick up the guests' dirty laundry in the morning, wash the clothes at their home and then bring the clean laundry back the afternoon of the same day.

"I give the guests three mesh bags, and they can fill them, but they have to stay together and only one person can use it, unless it's a couple, or a mother and a child. When it comes to me, I have a sheet, and I assign them a number with the bag. And then I'll assign someone to do the laundry," Waldner explained.

Leo and Marie Dodge, members of St. Paul since 2006, also volunteer. Marie was at the Dohony Hall kitchen every evening, along with nine other volunteers, preparing dinner. He was one of five drivers who volunteered their own vehicles to pick up and drop off guests at the Columbia Mall, an effort that involves Grassroots personnel.

"This is an excellent opportunity to put your Christian faith into action," he said. "We can talk the talk, but if we don't do anything to help those in need, then it's just that 'talk.'"

Baer considers her role as head volunteer coordinator for the program at the parish as a great way to give back to the community.

"What a gift to give, when you don't have to put out money, but you are giving of yourself," she said.

Email Rico De Silva at rdesilva@catholicreview.org