

Homeless to dismantle tents at St. Vincent de Paul

As 2008 begins, the pastor of St. Vincent de Paul, Baltimore, will order all makeshift tents used by the homeless in the park adjacent to the church to come down.

It's not a new order by any means. It's one that Father Richard T. Lawrence has been enforcing for years.

Every January Father Lawrence tells the occupants of the tents made of tarps, blankets and discarded furniture to dismantle the do-it-yourself shelters and by the next Christmas, the land next to the downtown church is once again littered with improvised campsites, he said.

However, Father Lawrence waits until after the holidays to enforce the "no-tent" rule on the church property that some of Baltimore's homeless refer to as "tent city" or "bum park."

"I'm not the Grinch," he said. "I'm not going to force the tents to come down until January."

The priest doesn't want to force the homeless away from the park. He wants to discourage drug dealing and prostitution that is believed to be taking place inside some of those tents.

"The tents become a haven for the drug dealers to sell their dope and the prostitutes to sell their bodies," Father Lawrence said. "We don't want the homeless to be cold either, but those makeshift shelters camouflage the illegal activities. The homeless are welcome. The drug boys are not."

Many of the men and women who sleep by St. Vincent de Paul are clients at the Beans & Bread day resource center for the homeless in Fells Point, and when the tents are forced to come down, the employees will be ready to search for temporary housing.

"I think what makes us stand out in terms of responding to shelter requests is that we take the time to place a call to make sure that a bed is open or if it's something unfamiliar with us, to see what's required for admittance," said Kathleen Spain, director of Beans & Bread. "We would never just give a client an address and send them on their way, as it could result in the client being turned away."

For the Loyola College in Maryland, Baltimore, students and employees who distribute sandwiches and snacks to the homeless at the park on a weekly basis, this annual tent removal does not stop their mission.

"It has not affected our presence there nor do I presume it will do anything to deter us from visiting with our friends who make the streets their home," said Mary Anne Cappelleri, assistant director of service-faith and poverty concerns at Loyola. Though parishioners at St. Vincent de Paul have compassion for the men and women who reside alongside their church and have devoted time, money and resources to help keep them warm and fed, the homeless presence does make some in the congregation uneasy when they attend Mass.

"Cars have been broken into and vandalized and some people are worried about security issues," said Brother Jim Horan, S.J., a parishioner of St. Vincent de Paul. "These are legitimate concerns. But, we're also concerned about these people who are homeless and we want to do our part for those men and woman in need."