

Winter Relief offers the homeless comfort in the cold Rotating shelter provides haven during the year's most bitter months



Karen Isenberg, of Glen Burnie, who has been homeless for almost one year, tries to stay warm and read a book at her bunk.
(Kenneth K. Lam, Baltimore Sun / January 7, 2013)

By Jonathan Pitts, The Baltimore Sun
1:02 p.m. EST, January 7, 2013

A year ago, if you'd asked David Moore to generalize about homeless people, he'd have said most were probably addicted to drugs or alcohol, lacking in ambition and unworthy of the general public's trust. Then he became homeless himself.

"I'll be honest with you, I wasn't prepared for that to happen," said Moore, a 46-year-old Arnold native who lost his job and his apartment last fall, only to end up living in his car.

He might have lost his hope as well, he said, had he not heard about Winter Relief, a program sponsored by the Arundel House of Hope in Glen Burnie that offers a select group of more than 90 homeless people a warm place to sleep every night through the winter months.

Now in its 21st year, the program is a rotating emergency shelter, one in which more than 60 Anne Arundel County houses of worship open their doors to homeless men and women for seven days at a time, then watch as the group pulls up stakes and heads to the next site.

"Lucky for me, the people who serve us and the people I live with are incredibly supportive and kind," Moore said one night last week as he set up his cot at Asbury United Methodist Church in Arnold, the latest host site. "I don't know what I'd have done without them."

The Winter Relief Emergency Center, as it's formally known, was born in 1992, when the Rev. Olin Herndon, then pastor of the Glen Burnie United Methodist Church, called a meeting of several county ministers he knew, telling them he wanted to discuss homelessness.

When they arrived, he threw them a clerical curveball, said Karen Biagiotti, current director of Winter Relief.

"He supposedly said, 'I got you here under false pretenses. I told you I wanted to talk about homelessness. What I really want is to do something about it,'" Biagiotti said.

By the end of the meeting, the ministers had hammered out the basics of Winter Relief, many of which are still in effect. Homeless men and women would have to stay sober and follow the rules. Every winter afternoon, they were to meet at a day center, sign in, take Breathalyzer tests and, assuming they passed, wait to be picked up by church volunteers and driven to that week's house of worship.

That year, Winter Relief served eight homeless people at 12 churches, all of which followed the program's founding principle — to "keep someone alive for one more night." It has grown every year since, to the point where 64 churches and a synagogue, Temple Beth Shalom in Annapolis, are providing services to 92 people this winter.

The program now runs two sites at a time for the 26 weeks between early October and early April, and recently added a third — at the Lighthouse Shelter in Annapolis — which runs through March 17.

Last year, it worked with more than 35 percent of Anne Arundel's known homeless population, and as usual, there's a waiting list this year.

"As word has spread, the program has just gotten bigger and bigger," said Biagiotti, the program's lone full-time paid employee. "We'd love to run it year-round, to be honest, if we could get enough [places of worship] to join us."

One veteran advocate for the homeless said there are many reasons for its success. The Rev. Ed Jansen of the **Emmaus** Center, a Catholic church in Glen Burnie whose mission is to help the "forgotten members" of society, said it offers members of the broader community an opportunity to show genuine spiritual love by "meeting our less fortunate brothers and sisters at their place of need." He also called it well-structured, safe for the participants and cost-effective.

"You look at some homeless shelters and they cost tens of millions of dollars," he said. "Nothing against that, but because Winter Relief is staffed almost completely by volunteers, it barely costs the taxpayers a cent, and it's just as effective. It's the kind of thing politicians on both sides of the aisle can get behind, and how often can you say that?"

Arundel House of Hope, a nonprofit advocacy group for the homeless based in Glen Burnie, grew from the earliest versions of Winter Relief and now oversees it.

On **New Year's Eve**, as night began to fall and a chill wind swirled, the men and women assigned to Asbury United — picked up earlier in Glen Burnie by church volunteers — lined up at the front door.

Most seemed glad to be getting out of the cold, and as they signed in, a team of volunteers greeted them, often with hugs and by name.

It's the 10th year Asbury United has taken part.

"Hi, Susie. How are you?" Gaye Baker, longtime director of the church's effort, asked a guest. "Are you warm enough? Do you have a coat?"

"People are here for all kinds of reasons," said Eric Bowman, a church member from Cape St. Claire who is also a veteran of the program. "It's not my place to judge. It's to be welcoming."

Short and tall, limping and healthy, 20-something and elderly, the guests trooped into the church's fellowship hall, where 34 cots were set up, and went about re-establishing their community for the week.

There was Karen Wood, a Bible-quoting former Sunday school teacher who placed a photo of her two children on a chair beside her cot. Mary Cox-Raynor and Kenneth Raynor, who said they were celebrating their 17th wedding anniversary, shared a hug.

Ira "Joe" Moore, 59, (no relation to David Moore) sipped coffee and contemplated his relative good fortune. "A lot of these people would be dead by February otherwise," he said. "It's good to have a roof over your head."

Yes, David Moore said, there might be some in the group who struggle with substance abuse, can't seem to stay out of others' belongings or are insufficiently grateful, but as often as not, his current peers are like him — people who have suffered a bad break or two and are simply trying to right themselves.

Take his friend Karen Isenberg, who sat beside him as volunteers served up a fried-chicken dinner.

Isenberg, 56, said she lost her apartment last summer when her landlord decided to stop making his mortgage payments. Three weeks after that, a doctor told her she had cancer of the appendix and needed surgery right away.

She decided to take a pass. "I'd never have recuperated [while] living in a tent," she said. She was prepared just to live out the months she had left.

Then Jansen told her of Winter Relief. Isenberg opted for the surgery. She has been in the program since, resting as much as possible and saving for whatever might come next.

She's feeling better.

"This program has given me a chance to recover," she said.

For more information, contact the Arundel House of Hope at 410-863-4888 or go to <http://www.arundelhoh.org>.

jonathan.pitts@baltsun.com

Copyright © 2013, The Baltimore Sun