

Home with a heart

Church leaders, business owners come together to help get the homeless off cathedral steps and into a house

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Alfonzo Esquivel, 72, right, Elleé Reed, 54, center, and Jeff Blenkhorn, 37, eat dinner at the home provided through the Cathedral Square Program. The program offers homeless people a base - house, meals, showers - from which they can start piecing their lives back together. Sacramento Bee/Anne Chadwick Williams

The steps of the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament seemed, a few years back, to be leading the downtown community toward dispute.

On one side, the cathedral leadership felt they could not, in good faith, turn away the homeless people who sought protection and rest on their doorstep.

On the other side, business owners spent their mornings cleaning up after those who had defecated in their doorways overnight. They watched their customers cringing as people panhandled during lunch.

In the middle of the debate were the steps, or rather, the 15 to 20 homeless men, women and children who slept on them. Some had mental health problems or addictions. Others had experienced one problem too many -divorce, domestic violence, eviction, firing -and couldn't seem to pull themselves back on track.

The cathedral had been closed for two years. But everyone assumed that, once it reopened, the step-dwellers would return, as well. Unless, that is, they had somewhere else to go. The Rev. Jim Murphy suggested a mediated discussion on the issue. The city agreed to foot the bill for the talks. Perhaps everyone together could come up with a solution.



Christy White, 47, eats a chicken dinner he made for his housemates at the home provided by cathedral leadership and businesses. White says he worked as a roofer for years before getting laid off. He now works a couple of days a week at a walnut farm near Wheaton. Sacramento Bee/Anne Chadwick Williams

“We just decided to work together to try to make it a win-win-win situation for everybody,” said Shannon Lahey, president of the Cathedral’s St. Vincent de Paul chapter.

After months of discussion, an agreement emerged: The groups are working with a local nonprofit group, providing the money to rent a house to put up five people at a time.

Two months ago, in early December, the Cathedral Square Program opened its doors to its first five guests. Elleé Reed was one of them. He walked into the program’s four-bedroom house, located on a quiet residential street in Sacramento. He promptly lay down on his bed and slept for six hours. Reed is 54 years old. He says he suffers from manic depression, seizures, three slipped discs and a bad leg. He’s overcoming an addiction. He’s on parole. He slept on the cathedral steps for five years. He slept on the streets a lot longer than that. Now, finally, he had a place to call his own. He had keys.

“This is the first time in 15 years that I can actually say that I’m somewhere, somewhere that I can begin my life again,” he said, perched on a chair in the home’s simply furnished living room. “It feels great.”

A handful of those who started with the program have found permanent housing. Some have gained full-time employment. Reed, a disabled Vietnam veteran, spends his days collecting cans, visiting a methadone clinic for treatment and seeking a publisher for the book he’s writing about his life. He attends services in the cathedral on Sundays. He hopes to leave the program once he gets his government disability check going.

The program’s goals are simple: It offers people a base from which they can start piecing their lives back together. One Sunday morning each month, homeless people arrive at the church to see if any beds are available. Those who are accepted spend their days looking for jobs or working. Some focus on getting clean, or on getting government assistance to help with mental illness. They sleep two to a room, cook dinner for each other and in the evenings watch television on an old set with a homemade antenna. There’s a list of chores on the refrigerator. Judging by the house’s cleanliness — all beds made, all floors shining — people comply. If they smoke, they go outside. No fighting or drinking or drugs allowed. Speak to others as you want to be spoken to. Treat the house as if it’s your own. The basics.

“It’s not a house to lay around,” said 50-year-old Lucy Armstrong, the live-in house monitor. “We all learn we can’t bring the past back, you just got to look forward.”

Armstrong hasn’t slept on the streets, but at times she’s bounced from one relative’s house to the next. Sacramento Self Help Housing, which runs the program, hired her to oversee the house. In return, she receives free room and board while she looks for a job.

John Foley, executive director of Self Help Housing, says the program has been “super,” though he cautions that it will only be effective if there’s enough money to meet the full need of those sleeping in the area.

Contributions from the Cathedral’s St. Vincent de Paul chapter, the Sisters of Mercy, the California State Association of Counties, Pyramid Alehouse and a few other local businesses and churches pay for five people at a time to stay in the house at a cost of \$525 per person per month. In addition, Pyramid hosted a fundraiser brunch for the

program. With Sacramento Kings guard Mike Bibby signing autographs, they netted \$7,200 to help with startup costs.

Arezoo Zand, the general manager at Pyramid Alehouse, said she would prefer to spend money helping homeless people get off the streets, instead of spending money to hire more security guards.

“It’s easy to tell the police to come out and arrest them,” she said. “What I would like to do is be part of the solution to help them long term.”

The Downtown Partnership raised an additional \$670 with a fundraiser at the ice rink on the K Street Mall. Eventually, the group hopes enough businesses will come forward to fund placements for 10 people a month. In exchange, police officers will discourage homeless people from sleeping on the steps.

So long as he has another place to sleep, that’s no problem for 47-year-old Christy White.

“A year outside, it was getting old,” he said. White, who says he worked as a roofer for years before getting laid off, now works a couple days a week at a walnut farm near Wheaton. He’s trying to find a full-time job, so he can earn enough to rent a place of his own. For now, in the evenings he cooks chicken and beans and mashed potatoes for his housemates. He loves that he can shower whenever he wants.

“Oh, yeah, that’s beautiful,” he said.

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