



WINTER OF OUR HOMELESS

by Michael A. Stoops

During the winter of 1986-1987 there will be an unprecedented number of homeless people on the streets and sidewalks of our nation. The demands for emergency assistance will be at record levels far beyond our ability to meet.

In Portland, for example, shelter providers are deeply concerned because there have already been more homeless families and single women in our shelters than there were last year. The latest figure agreed upon by shelter providers shows that fifty-two percent of the homeless in Portland are homeless families. In city after city across the country, the story is the same.

Why is this happening now? No one can say for certain. Perhaps it is the cumulative effects of the federal budget cuts, or economic conditions, or the virtual disappearance of affordable housing that has finally caused the simultaneous destitution of so many who have hung on until now. But whatever resources or possibilities that were previously available have been exhausted. Regardless of why this is happening, the results are the same: the pain, suffering and death are all on the increase for the homeless citizens of our nation.

The time has come — in fact, it is long overdue — for the President, Congress, federal agencies and the American people to do their fair share in meeting the emergency needs of America's homeless.

It is indeed unconscionable that one federal agency, the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), which oversees the federal government's only spending program specifically for the homeless, has, in fact, spent less money on homelessness in America in the last three years, than the City of New York has spent on helping its homeless in just the past year. And New York City has not spent nearly enough.

To reflect a more realistic, proportionate and urgent response by the federal government to the crisis needs of our nation's homeless citizens, an appropriate bill has been introduced in Congress calling for the appropriation of two hundred and fifty million dollars for the immediate provision of food and shelter for the homeless, a drastic increase in what the federal government has spent in the past. The bill also appropriates one hundred million dollars for the renovation of federal buildings for use as shelters or for the construction of new facilities where appropriate federal buildings are not available for conversion and renovation. And finally, the bill also creates a permanent governmental agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to administer this program, and to formulate, facilitate, and coordinate the federal government's future response to the growing problem of homelessness in this nation. This bill was introduced in Congress in late October by U.S. Representative Mike Lowry, Democrat from Seattle.

Solutions do not rest solely with the federal government, of course. Considering the magnitude of the problem, however, realistic responses are just not possible without federal involvement.

With the winter of 1986-1987 now almost upon us, we can't sit back and watch another winter go by with the President, Congress and the federal government turning a deaf ear — from the comfort of their warm offices — while between two to three million of our homeless brothers and sisters both live and die on our nation's sidewalks and streets.

To bring the reality of homelessness closer to the hearts and minds of the U.S. Congress and American people, some of us — both homeless activists and homeless people from around the country — are taking up residence on the Capitol grounds and will remain there in a continuous presence until Congress enacts this emergency legislation or until next spring.

ARTHUR'S HOUSE

Arthur's front door, his only door, overlooked the riverbank. Freeways arched overhead, noisy, cement rivers of commerce that kept the rain from Arthur's roof. Carefully constructed, the 3 x 10 foot dwelling was blanketed with thick carpet, insulated over a plywood roof with rough horsehair, and heated by a tall stone fireplace. It was clean of possessions, invaded momentarily as we crowded around the squared doormat and peered in, by some twenty pairs of astonished teenaged eyes, one of the stops on a tour of Portland's Skid Road.

Skid Road is a logging term, taken aptly from the days when men would skid newly cut logs down wet Oregon dirt roads to the cold river. Cut from their roots, sliding into the chilled, damp holiday season ahead, an unprecedented millions of Americans will be homeless this year; the largest portion of the newly homeless will be families.

The multilayered needs of the homeless and jobless are overwhelming, and in being overwhelming, defeat our best intentions, turning to mute apathy our horror, or pity or concern. When once we tackle the problems with grit and elbow grease, when one shelter is built, a toilet repaired, a heating unit installed, then, we suddenly come upon the frightening question — what of tomorrow? Tomorrow I will be warm and fed, and he, she, they, will not be. The question invariably

MIDDLE CLASS LAMENT

I complained because my roof leaks.
Then I saw a person who has no roof at all.

I complained because my floor needs repairs. Then I saw people who have floors of dirt and sleep on pillows of stone.

I complained because my food dollars wouldn't buy everything on my shopping list. Then I met someone who had no money for groceries at all.

I grumbled because my magazine subscription expired. Then I met someone who cannot afford any magazines at all.

I complained because I might not get to take another vacation in Europe. Then I talked to someone who can't afford any vacation, anytime, anywhere.

Though my closet overflows, I complained that I was tired of wearing the same old clothes. Then I heard of someone who has only one change.

I complained because I just don't make enough money at my job. Then I saw those who have no job at all.

I am blessed while others go homeless and hungry. May God forgive my selfishness. I live in middle class riches.

— EMILY BROWN

By joining the ranks of the unsheltered homeless and risking possible loss of life or limb, we hope and pray that this action will make visible and concrete the consequences of federal inaction and indifference, and to reduce the distance between ourselves with those who wait in pain and loneliness to come in from the cold.

We believe that the President, Congress and the federal government will not act unless and until it has to. We believe that our presence at the U.S. Capitol this winter can help create the focus and pressure that will result in action.

Michael Stoops is the Board Chairman of the Burnside Community Council in Portland. The Winter Homeless Vigil in Washington, D.C. began on Thanksgiving Day and will last until the first day of spring or until Congress passes the requested emergency legislation.

points to the inadequacy of any existing economic system to care for the poor, and, equally inevitably to the assumption that in an economic system based on competition, some will be cared for and some will be trampled underfoot by the competition. As activist Catholic priest Daniel Berrigan has pointed out, the yearly death of a certain number of poor on our streets this winter is a toll we expect.

The Oregon teenagers staring into Arthur's hole in the riverbank were budding Catholics on a weeklong social service mission. They were testing what it meant to look at poverty and say they believed in Christ, a pursuit that may well last them a lifetime. A woman who spent her life in pursuit of that same question, Dorothy Day, wrote that "going to the people is the purest and best act in Christian tradition, and is the beginning of world brotherhood." A retired Astoria gentleman put it to me in another way: "Take a walk around the neighborhood," he said. "When you see a hole in a fence, patch it."

His option sounds simplistic, but it implies constancy, and constancy is hardly simple. Simpler is the gentle way of unconcern, the long slow slide down the other Skid Road into the poverty of the human heart.

— KATRIN BRIDGET SNOW