

# Shelters Exceed Capacity as Cold Hits



Families set up sleeping arrangements, mingle, and try to help others at a homeless shelter exclusively for families with children in east Portland.

continued ▲ from front

watched 60 beds fill up, with more families pouring in and none turned away.

As of the first week in December, the shelter has exceeded capacity every night. Food, blankets, warm clothing, and volunteers are wearing thin. With all three Sunday school rooms packed, the nursery sacrificed for bed space, and just two bathrooms, only a small church donation room is left unoccupied.

"We're so short on space," said Jean DeMaster, director of Human Solutions, who has watched the number of homeless people rise in Portland since her involvement began in the 1970s. In the last two years, family homelessness in Multnomah County has risen by 35 percent.

She predicts a "very bleak" future in "these hard economic times" for low and very-low income families in the next few years, with the worse yet to come in January and February when vacations and seasonal jobs end, and people staying with family over the holidays hit the streets.

Human Solutions seeks to find long-term solutions for the homeless by getting them out of shelters and into housing. With the help of housing and employment specialists, three families have been placed so far.

"When you're in this situation, you are scared, especially with children, you are very afraid," said Joe Moreno who is staying at the shelter with wife Cristal and their three kids, Michael, 13, Jazzmine "Jazzy" Rose, 10, and Jeremiah, 6. "But, this is a safe house."

Never expecting to be homeless, the couple is grateful for the wrap-around hospitality and assume the situation would be more dangerous in Los Angeles, where they left for a fresh start in Portland.

Living on one income with kids in Los Angeles was terrible, said Cristal, who worked as a nursing assistant for minimum-wage. Her husband was unemployed and could not find work in the financially-frozen field of construction. A self-described jack of all trades and master of none, he said in L.A., "Construction is dead. They're not building. Factories are closing, and even docking is going out of business."

Cristal's pay check dwindled as the nursing-to-patient ratio slimmed, and her hours were cut back. The couple could simply no longer afford rent for their apartment. Forced to move out, the family hopped hotels for months until Cristal found better job offers in Portland as a nursing assistant.

Rent for an apartment in Portland is \$600 dollars less than Los Angeles, and as a nurse assistant, she would earn \$4 more an hour than at her previous nursing home job, Cristal said.

Looking north for cheaper living and higher-paying jobs, the family rode by Greyhound to Oregon, where Cristal's uncle had offered them a place to stay. However, when the couple and kids arrived, their relatives said they had been mistaken, that they had no room.

"I didn't know what to do," said Cristal. "I called 211."

The couple was referred to Human Solutions Family Winter Shelter, where only families are taken in

and homeless individuals are referred elsewhere.

Upon arrival they were given blankets, coats, food, and a place to sleep. Cristal said she bares her uncle no ill will. If he had the resources to help, he would have.

"We've been treated very kind

Smiling, conversation, and encouragement are a must. The couple often tells the kids: Everything is going to be okay—this is just temporary.

"They are a little depressed because it's Christmas time," said Joe. "It's a big change, but I'm very proud of them."

Of the three kids, the eldest Michael seems to be more affected than the younger ones. As a teen, he left his friends and school behind, but as a straight-A student, Michael has taken the role as editor of his new school's newspaper in less than one month.

"They are adapting very well," said Joe. "It will take a little time, but things will be normal again."

From the time families arrive at 7 p.m. until each settle in for bed around 9 p.m., the church hallways are lively; families set up sleeping arrangements, mingle, make food in the kitchen, walk around, and the children play together.

"We all help each other out," said Joe. "Like one big ol' happy family."

Though a sense of camaraderie seems to air in the shelter, feelings of despair and depression are just as common. Many are single-parents who might need a break from an unhappy, teething newborn or want someone to talk to.

"We try to uplift each other," said Cristal. "We're all in the same



PHOTOS BY CARI HACHMANN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Jean DeMaster finds space for homeless families in a church shelter run by her non-profit agency Human Solutions.

here," said Joe Moreno. "This is a blessing. Without it we'd be on the streets."

As stressful the situation is for Joe and Cristal, they cannot lose composure. Kids may not understand what's happening, but they sense their parents' nervousness.

boat."

Families can only stay at the shelter until 7 a.m. Most disperse to Human Solutions other two-day shelters on Southwest 13th and Salmon and Southeast 127th and Market with provided bus passes.

Every day, the Morenos wake up

at 6 a.m. and get their kids ready for Sun School, a transitional school in downtown Portland for children in different stages of homelessness.

From warm and breezy L.A., the family is still acclimating to Portland's cold and wet weather. They have warm and weathered clothes provided to them by Human Solutions donations. The couple is familiarizing themselves with Portland's diverse neighborhoods.

The family rides the bus together, and after the kids are safe at school, Joe and Cristal look for work. The couple meets with a specialist once a week to review employment and housing efforts.

With the help of resources from Human Solutions, Joe attained his Oregon drivers license.

"I'm an Oregonian now," he said. "It's beautiful out here."

The couple spends hours at the library hunting for jobs online, filling out applications, networking, and going to interviews.

"There are jobs out there, you just have to look," said Joe, optimistic that he and Cristal will be employed by January. "You have to better yourself."

If the agency's housing specialist observes consistent effort, the Morenos will be moved up on the wait list for a house or apartment.

Many families receive help from Human Solutions for 6 to 9 months, offering access to resources and housing to stabilize lives. The Morenos hope to be settled in before then.

"It's just a matter of getting all our ducks in a row," said Cristal.

Each night, about 150 families are temporarily housed between Human Solutions other two facilities. About 1,000 families receive assistance over the course of the year.

Jean DeMaster fears looming cuts to federal and state social-services programs. Human Solutions fundraises an extra \$700,000 a year to keep the shelter open longer. Federal funding shuts the Winter Family Shelter at the end of March.

"It was so unfair, in a country as rich as ours, that people didn't have anywhere to stay," said DeMaster of her reasons for wanting to get Portland's homeless off the streets and into homes.

The dramatic increase in the number of homeless families needing shelter has meant the quick response of Human Solutions. Resources are tight, and Human Solutions is appealing to the public for help.

Volunteers are needed to assist the overnight staff by spending the night to reduce the need to hire more paid staff. Blankets, food, and eating utensils are needed to serve the families at night. Financial donations are needed to supply the costs of keeping the shelter running.