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Larry W. Rice

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A ST. LOUIS SOLUTION TO THE HOMELESS PROBLEM

*LARRY W. RICE**

The problem of homelessness is increasing in St. Louis, following a nationwide trend. According to a study by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, there were at least 20,000 homeless persons in St. Louis in 1984. New Life Evangelistic Center, a major provider of emergency housing in St. Louis, has reported an increase in the number of homeless in the past two years. The number of women and children on the streets represents the most substantial increase. The major causes of this increase in homelessness are urban renewal, governmental cutbacks in social services, and deinstitutionalization of mental patients. St. Louis social organizations are responding to the homeless problem by providing social services and pressuring local governments, through litigation and political activities, to recognize the problem and provide for homeless relief.

In November, 1985, Legal Services of Eastern Missouri filed suit against the City of St. Louis on behalf of eighteen homeless people. The parties signed a consent decree as a result of the suit, in which the City agreed to meet certain needs of the homeless. The City agreed to appropriate no less than \$310,000 during fiscal year 1985-86 to implement services to meet the needs of the homeless. These services were to include a reception center, transportation services, and a day center for women, children and families. The City also agreed to provide twenty-four hour temporary housing facilities for the homeless, containing a minimum of two hundred beds in 1986. The City agreed to open additional temporary shelters during severe weather. The City

* Director, New Life Evangelistic Center, St. Louis, Missouri.

also said that it would provide at least 100 additional units of permanent housing.¹

The New Life Evangelistic Center in St. Louis has several privately funded programs to help the homeless, including the operation of shelters. The Center coordinates, for example, a "Winter Patrol." Volunteers search for the homeless from 10 p.m. to midnight every night during the winter months. On extremely cold nights, the volunteers often stay out all night, hoping to find the homeless. Once found, the homeless are offered sandwiches and taken to shelter for protection from the cold weather.

The center is attacking the problem of a lack of low income housing through an innovative program entitled "Homesteading for a New Life." The program offers low-income people the opportunity to own their own homes. The homesteading program works this way:

1. Interested persons complete an application that asks questions about financial need and ability and willingness to maintain a home.

2. Applications are reviewed by representatives of the Center and KNLC Channel 24, a local television station. The most qualified applicants are contacted for a personal interview.

3. From the interviewed group, selected applicants are given twenty-four hours of building maintenance and repair classes. Four hours of instruction are provided in six areas: a) plumbing, b) electrical, c) carpentry, d) heating, e) painting and plastering, and f) preventive and general house maintenance.

4. Each graduate from this instruction is then required to do one hundred hours of on-the-job training work on a particular house.

5. Upon successful completion of the first four steps of this program, the final recipients are selected. These applicants are allowed to move into a rehabilitated home, with an established value for the period of time the applicant is considered a renter. For example, if a house has a six year value of \$7,200, including insurance and taxes, the applicant would pay \$100 per month rent and be responsible for maintenance of the home. These revenues go into a revolving fund to renovate more homes. At the end of the six year period, if the applicant has adequately maintained the home, he will acquire title to it.

This homesteading program offers unique opportunities for low-income people. The classes and the on-the-job training give the applicant

1. As of July 1986 the City had not fulfilled a majority of its obligations under the consent decree.

the knowledge needed to maintain a home. Renting with an opportunity to own gives the applicant an incentive to keep the home in good repair. The monthly rent paybacks provide additional revenue for New Life Evangelistic Center's activities, including the homesteading program. The gains in low-income housing from homesteading programs do not, however, offset the losses of this housing through cutbacks in federal housing programs and local governments' efforts at urban renewal, which convert low-income housing into more expensive housing.

Though the city government has been reluctant to provide services for the homeless,² private agencies have developed assistance programs. These programs do not totally solve the homeless problem in St. Louis, but are a step in the right direction. More direct help programs for the poor and homeless are needed.

2. *See supra* note 1.

