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Charities Assists Low-Income New Yorkers With Basic Housing Needs

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HELPING HANDS—Father Michael Callaghan, C.O., executive director of Nazareth Housing, shares a smile with participants of Nazareth Housing's programming in the organization's Lower East Side offices.

Second of a Monthly Series

The faces of homelessness are not what one may expect. They include families with dependent children, single mothers, and the underemployed and unemployed.

“It’s a very simple fact that most people wind up in shelters because they can’t pay their rent,” said Msgr. Kevin Sullivan, executive director of Catholic Charities of New York.

The Catholic Charities federation includes agencies and programs that focus on homelessness and housing-related issues. Antonio Garcia, director of eviction prevention and housing education for Catholic Charities Community Services, noted the importance of serving the homeless and those who are at-risk of becoming homeless. Catholic Charities Community Services’ homelessness prevention program includes assistance with eviction prevention, housing court advocacy, landlord negotiations, delinquent rent, and financial assistance and relocation support services.

“Housing is a very important issue to the extent that it is one of the foundations of being able to raise a

family and to be able to succeed in life,” Garcia said. “Having shelter is a basic need. We have to make sure needy people in New York City have adequate shelter and adequate affordable housing. It fits very well with the mission of Catholic Charities.”

According to its annual report, Catholic Charities last year provided assistance to:

- nearly 4,700 families in homeless prevention programs;
- 6,524 families now living in affordable housing;
- more than 2,500 people in transitional apartments;
- 8,430 individuals receiving emergency overnight shelter.

Nazareth Housing Inc. is a nonprofit organization affiliated with the Catholic Charities federation that helps people with a variety of housing needs.

Founded in 1983 by Sister Marion Agnes Daniel, M.S.B.T., Nazareth Housing quickly became known for assisting low-income residents on the Lower East Side to renovate abandoned buildings through the “homesteading” process, in which neighborhood people put in “sweat equity” to fix up buildings to create permanent housing.

Today, Nazareth Housing operates two buildings in Harlem and one on the Lower East Side as emergency family shelters, with a total of 79 apartments. “We do anticipate adding further shelter units,” said Father Michael Callaghan, C.O., Nazareth’s current executive director.

Nazareth Housing also helps people find permanent supportive housing and offers advocacy, emergency assistance and eviction prevention services. It has a staff of 14, along with about 100 volunteers each year. “When people become homeless, it’s not because they’ve done something wrong,” Father Callaghan explained. “It’s not because of immoral or wanton living. It is the result of poverty.”

He noted that there has been an increase of 8 percent in the number of homeless families in New York City in the past year. On any given night, he said, there are some 16,000 children in shelters. The vast majority of homeless are families with dependent children, he said.

“So many people in New York live paycheck to paycheck,” Father Callaghan said. When the economy declines, “people who are already marginal” in the job force often find their hours reduced or eliminated, he explained.

“Families that were holding on before are losing their grip,” said Father Callaghan, who said the rising cost of health care, transportation and utilities are all factors that can contribute to homelessness. “People are spending more and more just to pay the basics,” he said.

A major emphasis of Nazareth Housing’s work is homelessness prevention. Phil Georgini, director of shelter services at Nazareth Housing, explained that the nonprofit agency tries to assist people with a plan to avoid eviction. “There are reasons why they don’t pay their rent—addictions, mental health issues, unemployment or underemployment—issues which affects their ability to pay their rent,” he said.

Mildred Perez is a homelessness prevention specialist. On a typical day, Ms. Perez may assist a client with financial management, search for affordable health insurance or help a parent find childcare. “I look for what can cause them to become homeless, and what can be done before it occurs,” she said. “We are not just about finding a bandage for the problem, but finding a solution.” That solution may include outreach to other agencies in the five boroughs, she said.

For those who have no other choice but to enter into a shelter, Georgini said, “The goal of the whole program is to move people into permanent housing.” He noted that the average length of stay for people in temporary housing shelters is six to nine months, with that time period recently stretching longer due to the poor economy.

Housing specialists offer clients referrals to employment services and medical providers, help with identifying affordable housing and assistance filling out loan forms and other paperwork.

Nelson Maldonado, a former temporary shelter resident who now lives in an apartment on the Lower East Side with his 10-year-old son thanks to assistance from Nazareth Housing, said, “If it wasn’t for Nazareth

Housing, I wouldn't be where I am today.”

The staff helped him through the process to a permanent residence, including workshops on topics such as finding employment and budgeting for bills. “They pointed me in the right direction,” he said. “They advised me. They told me everything I needed to do to make it work for me.

“I thank God that they were there for me.”

Msgr. Sullivan said the lack of affordable housing, especially in New York City, has a direct impact on the ability of lower-income New Yorkers to find a place to live. According to the New York City Housing Authority Web site, new Section 8 housing applications have not been processed since December 2009.

“The cost of rental apartments is extremely high,” Msgr. Sullivan said. “The basic challenge is to increase the number of affordable housing units. We could make a major impact for poor, struggling, working families to find and live in decent affordable housing if we had a more robust and expanded Section 8 housing program.”