

## THE HOMELESS IN WASHINGTON, DC

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Reaching out to help the “other population”

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Just how many homeless are there in America? One estimate frequently used is the Urban Institute figure of 3.5 million people living on the streets or in shelters in the United States. In the nation's capital, an estimated 14,000 people are homeless on any given day, though this figure includes those staying in temporary or transitional housing, as well as those living on the streets. Nationwide, single men make up an estimated 44 percent of the homeless population, while families with children account for over 50 percent. Personal problems, including mental illness or substance abuse, have brought many individuals and families to the streets and shelters. Low-paying jobs and the high costs of housing and health care have brought others (see page 85).

### LIFE ON THE STREETS

As a nation, we have grown accustomed to the presence of the homeless in our cities. Or perhaps it is just too uncomfortable to acknowledge these individuals. It has become easy to ignore the outstretched hand, or the blanketed figures sleeping in the doorway, under bridges, and on church steps. But these are people, each with a story of his or her own. Most have dreams of a life off the streets. Most, in my view, are basically decent people.

About 14 years ago, I became acquainted with a gentle homeless man who attended St. John's Episcopal Church at Lafayette Square in Washington, DC. For more than 10 years, we sat in consecutive pews on Sundays and formed a strong friendship. Through this friendship, I made other friends among the homeless who congregate around St. John's Church and the squares nearby. When this man died in October 2000, his friends saw to it that he was buried on the grounds of St. John's, also known as the “Church of the Presidents.”

After this kindly and thoughtful man's death, I resolved to do more to help the “other congregation” of St. John's Church—the people who spent their nights sleeping on the church steps. I began dropping by the church about two evenings a week to pass out fruit bars, peanut butter crackers, bottled water, and other snacks. My wife often accompanies me. Occasionally, we distribute McDonald's coupons, which are a favorite because they can be used to get coffee and a warm breakfast. We have learned that soft foods are preferable to those that are hard, as many of the homeless have dental problems.

For the destitute living on the steps of St. John's, the Salvation Army van stops by each evening to distribute dinner (which usually consists of soup or stew, a sandwich, and hot chocolate). DC Central Kitchen, which “recycles” surplus food from stores, restaurants, hotels, and other sources, prepares 4,000 meals each day. Martha's Table, where volunteers prepare soups and sandwiches to feed approximately 1,200 homeless each day through the McKenna Wagon program, is another source of food. Many other charitable organizations and churches, along with countless volunteers, do what they can each day to feed the homeless in Washington, DC. Every year at Thanksgiving, the TV cameras capture the images of thousands of homeless receiving a turkey dinner. The bigger challenge, though, is making sure there are meals the other 364 days of the year.

These provisions are a godsend for the dispossessed, some of whom likely would starve without food in the mornings, at noon, or in the evenings. Meeting other needs, including housing, clothes, job training, health care, and social services, also is provided by a patchwork of groups in Washington,



DC. A long list of organizations, including First Helping, So Others Might Eat, the Coalition for the Homeless, the Community for Creative Non-Violence, and many private or church-based initiatives help the city's neediest individuals, including those who sleep outside St. John's.

Most of the time, the resources of these organizations are stretched to the limit. The winters of 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 were particularly harsh. Due to the unmerciful weather, not everyone on the street could meet the Salvation Army van for the evening meal. It was very obvious when someone had missed the van, as they would immediately eat the items I gave them, instead of keeping them for a later snack. On one occasion, when the temperature was below 15°F and the wind-chill pushed it below zero, I met a gentleman whose beard had frozen to his face. When he reached for some crackers that I offered him, his flimsy coat came open. All he had on under his jacket was a T-shirt. I called the Emergency Hotline for the Homeless, which was dispatching trucks to pick up those at risk from the freezing cold. Not everyone was so lucky that winter: two homeless people froze to death in the city in February 2002, according to news reports.

## WHO BECOMES HOMELESS?

The statistics and the "solutions" to the homeless problem don't tell the whole story, however. Understanding why individuals become homeless is perhaps a more important step to finding ways to help these people. I have become acquainted with many of the homeless who sleep on the steps of St. John's Church, or in the vicinity. Many have shared their stories with me. Some of these folks are capable of working, but cannot find jobs that would make it possible for them to move off the street. Others were laid off from once-promising careers as computer scientists, assembly line workers, and security guards. And others are working at low-paying jobs, but simply cannot earn enough to rent an apartment.

Some of those who live near St. John's are remarkably talented. One woman living on the street is an artist and paints superb floral still-life canvases. Another person only recently began to sketch. His drawings have begun to attract the attention of local art gallery owners in Washington.

Many others, though, have mental handicaps that prevent them from working, though they are not so ill that they require hospitalization. Depression is common among the homeless, particularly for those who have lost their jobs and all contact with their families and friends. Several of those whom I've met on the grounds of St. John's are victims of alcohol and/or drug abuse. Although there are numerous counseling programs, many do not seek help, or fail to complete the programs. Some eventually get help from their families or connect with an organization that helps them obtain the treatment they need, and enables them to transition to a structured living arrangement.

Several of the people I've met on the streets, once given counseling and basic assistance to get themselves started, were able to rent their own apartments, enroll in job training programs, and make plans for the future. In some cases, all it took was some help navigating the government assistance process, so that the individual could apply for Social Security or disability benefits, housing vouchers, medical care, and other public assistance.

Many of the homeless with mental problems, however, continue to fall between the cracks, and likely will find it difficult to move off the streets. Several of the people I met had ongoing delusions about their involvement with government agencies, major sports figures, and "extraterrestrials," for example. For these individuals, many of whom seem to have a deep distrust of government agencies and officials, there may be no easy fix. Without family members to step in and take an active role in making sure that appointments are kept and medications are taken regularly, a stable future may not be possible for some of these people.



## LOOKING FOR ANSWERS: WHAT WILL HELP?

If these encounters have taught me anything, it is that there is no single “solution” to resolving the problem of the homeless. At the national level, Representatives Julia Carson, (D-Indiana) and John Conyers (D-Michigan) introduced in July 2003 H.R. 2897, a measure that would provide increased federal resources for job training, affordable housing, public transportation, and increased health care for the homeless. The measures in this bill “to end homelessness in the United States” certainly would help many of the nation’s homeless, including the rising numbers of homeless women and homeless families with young children. The bill currently has 57 co-sponsors.

At the local level, in the summer of 2004 DC Mayor Anthony Williams introduced the District’s 10-year plan to end homelessness, entitled “Homeless No More.” One of the main goals of this program is to develop affordable housing units. Ultimately, the 7,421 beds at longterm and emergency housing shelters in Washington, DC, would be replaced with nearly 10,000 new places in permanent, affordable housing.

And, on an individual and more personal level, isn’t it time for all America’s citizens to become more involved in helping those who live on the streets in Washington and other cities across the country? “Involvement” at all levels, including volunteerism, political activism, and supporting any of the many non-profit or charitable programs, can help alleviate the plight of the homeless. After all, these are human beings, not statistics. They once had families, hopes, and dreams—and can have a more promising future.

The next time you are on the street, consider purchasing a copy of *Street Sense*, a monthly newspaper sold by the homeless for one dollar. The paper contains wonderful stories, many written by homeless individuals, about issues that involve or affect the homeless. The homeless vendor keeps 70 cents of each dollar received. The paper also provides one of the best means of keeping those living on the streets informed about available shelters, outreach centers, soup kitchens, emergency food sources, and medical resources. Another source of information for and about the homeless in Washington, DC is the website [www.community-partnership.org/facts.html](http://www.community-partnership.org/facts.html). Above all, though, a friendly and sincere hello from a stranger and a few minutes of conversation can make for a better day in the life of a homeless individual.