

Help for the forgotten

By D. Craig MacCormack/ Staff Writer

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New group helps families gain affordable housing

They are often the forgotten ones among charitable organizations, but it is their stability that perhaps has the most profound effect on society.

The Metrowest Outreach Connection, an all-volunteer non-profit group formed earlier this year to combat homelessness in the region, sees their work as life altering and world-changing, saying it can get people on the right road.

Before incorporating, members of the group, who come mainly from area churches, had spent hours cooking, collecting and packing food as well as delivering meals and food supplies to families in area motels.

"We know what we were doing was essentially a Band-Aid," said Len Dalton, the president of MWOC and a member of Plymouth Church, the organization's local headquarters.

The focus of MWOC is helping individuals and families to stay in their homes or to gain access to safe, decent and affordable housing. MWOC offers financial assistance for families who are unable to make a rent or mortgage payment.

One family MWOC has helped - a mother and two teen-age children - was facing eviction because they were behind in their rent payments. Their rent amounted to about 70 percent of the mother's income.

The woman was working two jobs to bring in as much income as possible. MWOC gave \$300 to South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC) to prevent the family from eviction.

The family is still in their home and the mother could soon be promoted.

"These are the people who have the greatest needs in our society," said Mike Dineen, former Framingham school administrator and treasurer of MWOC. "You're talking about food, shelter, clothing and education."

As many children are shifted from motel to motel, their school lives are regularly interrupted, their nutrition suffers and their opportunities to participate in after-school programs are almost non-existent, said Dineen.

He and his wife Ruth delivered meals to families living at Motel 6 through a program at St. Bridget's Church, he said.

"It's a sad commentary on our society today that we have families who are homeless with children who have to move from school to school simply to get an education," said Dineen, who retired in 2001 after 40 years in local schools.

"I wanted to find something meaningful and to do whatever I could to make a difference. That's what my life has been about," he said, noting he saw some homeless families during his time as principal at McCarthy School.

Many parents are cooped up with two or three children in a small motel room with only a microwave for cooking and no place for their children to play.

MWOC's focus for 2004-05 is to prevent the onset of homelessness among at-risk families and to assist homeless people to obtain permanent housing.

The organization is developing a community-based Homeless Prevention Program to help fill the void left by limited government funding. It will host a walk in Framingham on Sunday, Sept. 26 to support efforts that prevent homelessness.

The walk will be from 1 to 3 p.m., starting on the Framingham Common across from the First Parish.

MWOC will continue to work secure funds to assist families and individuals as they strive to stay out of the growing ranks of the homeless in the state. At least 95 cents of every dollar is earmarked for the cause, said Dineen.

There are about a dozen volunteers in the organization, with more expected to join when efforts to raise money hit full stride, he said. MWOC, which has pulled in \$29,000 so far, hopes to raise \$80,000 by the end of the year.

The group has financial backing from the Carlisle Foundation, churches and Samaritans across MetroWest and the Community Development Block Grant.

Fund-raising of \$60,000 could help 25 to 50 families, said Dalton. The most the group spends on a typical family is \$300, augmenting the work being done by SMOC, South Middlesex Legal Services, and Catholic Charities.

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They hope to form a partnership with the state Department of Transitional Assistance, he said. That department ran out of money recently, triggering the need for another group to step in and help out, said Dalton.

"At least these people know someone cares about them," he said. "The kids are the big thing. We are always trying to figure out what we can do to help them."

For more information about MetroWest Outreach Connection, log on to the organization's Web site at <http://www.mwoconnection.org>.

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