

Answering the call of misery

Outreach workers patrol where many fear to go

By Mark Curnutte • mcurnutte@enquirer.com • February 8, 2009

A woman, barely 20 and a homeless prostitute, stood shivering, her shoulders hunched in a hooded black coat. Snow swirled around her, rising in the 20-mile-an-hour wind from the ground as heavily as it fell.

It was 5:52 p.m. Tuesday. The sky grew to darker shades of gray. The wind-chill temperature fell below zero. Streetlights shone yellow on Dunlap Street in Over-the-Rhine, illuminating the white sidewalk and vacant brown- and red-brick buildings.

A Lighthouse Youth Services van, driven by caseworker Lea Drury, 30, eased through the slush to the curb. The woman, now accompanied by two men who had been standing nearby, walked to the van.

Caseworker Nelson Troché, 32, rolled down the passenger-side window. There were no sudden movements. The scene unfolded hesitantly, respectfully, almost as if in slow-motion.

"Hey, how are you doing? Do you need anything?" he asked.

The men each took a sandwich wrapped in a plastic bag and a bottle of water. The woman, a new contact for the team, declined offers of food, an insulated blanket and condoms.

"Take care. Wave us down if you ever need anything," Troché said to her.

Through one of the coldest and snowiest weeks of the year, the two outreach workers still made their rounds in some miserable, unhappy places - from a railroad yard and abandoned streets to cardboard-and-tarp camps on the bank of the Ohio River and the public library downtown - in search of young homeless people who might want help.

"Wherever they are," Troché said, "and whenever they are ready."

On three weekly trips, Troché and Drury encounter an average of 30 people a night.

Tuesday was no exception.

While most people in Greater Cincinnati struggled with long, inconvenient commutes, just wanting to get home safely, life went on uninterrupted on the streets.

The social workers make minute-at-a-time or long-term contact.

They carry a black satchel filled with bottled water, sandwiches on white bread, and condoms.

Condoms and bleach kits are part of what is called a "harm-reduction" program. The bleach is used to clean needles. Cincinnati has no needle-exchange program. They offer people "space blankets," Mylar wraps that, if worn under a jacket close to the body, allow a person to hold even more heat. A donor provided a box filled with cloth bags, which held gloves and socks.

Their homeless clients are drug-addicted prostitutes, trading sex for heroin or crack; transients making their way south from colder climates; the unemployed homeless, many gripped by alcohol or substance abuse; teens and young adults trying to get away from troubled family environments, including those of their making; and adult sex offenders who can't stay at shelters that are within 1,000 feet of a school.

The last homeless census in Cincinnati from 2007 identified 7,298 people in shelters; 1,800 of them were 17 or younger, 950 female, 850 male. More than 1,300 were between 18 and 30, a target population for Lighthouse programs, including transitional housing.

The largest group, 3,022 people, was ages 31-50. Four of every 10 adult homeless people here are mentally ill. "The (overall) numbers with the young people, especially, are low," said Georgine Getty, director of the Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless. "They are more likely to double-up and stay on friends' couches."

Such as the 20-year-old man Troché and Drury met when they walked through the main branch of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, known as the largest day shelter for the homeless in the region.

The young man, who declined to give his name, had been dropped off at the Lighthouse Youth Crisis Center on his 18th birthday. His parents, forming a blended family with several younger siblings, brought him to social workers. They no longer wanted to care for him. Since then, he has bounced from couch to couch.

Drury is trying to help the man get a job and into Lighthouse's transitional housing program.

She bent down, unzipped a side pocket in her sneakers and took out a bus token. She handed it to him.

"This is for you to get to my office Thursday," she said.

He nodded yes.

"They're cool," he said later of Drury and Troché, who in turn refer to him as "Sidekick" because of his ability to get along with different people.

David Yisrael celebrated his 18th birthday Tuesday night alone at the library. He sat at a computer on the third floor. He looked up maps of the Holy Land and said he wanted to visit there.

He said he argued with his mother. He has been in and out of the house since he was 9 years old.

"I'm lucky to make it through another year," Yisrael said after talking quietly with the outreach workers. "Lea has been a kind of sister to me. When you were down in spirits she always had a way of making you feel better."

Some of the encounters are brief. Some last for minutes.

A middle-aged homeless man sat at a table and read a book.

Without speaking, Troché pulled a wrapped sandwich from the satchel around his shoulder and held it up for the man to see. He nodded yes. Then Troché lifted up a bottle of water. Yes.

Another man, about 20, got on the library elevator, just beating the closing doors.

"Can I bother you?" Drury asked him. She handed him a Lighthouse card filled with phone numbers for assistance programs.

"We're outreach workers. If you know anybody who can use some help, please let them know they can call us."
"OK, thanks," he said.

They walked through Fountain Square. Men played broom ball on the ice rink.

Around the corner on Walnut Street, at the bus stop across from Government Square, Drury saw a man she had helped get into a drug program and to get housing for his family the year before. He was known by his nickname, "Scam," which he had tattooed across the back of his hand. He smoked the last two drags of a cigarette butt. He said he had just served time for stealing food but was still clean. He took a bottle of water.

Drury hugged him. The outreach workers walked north on Walnut, where they stopped to talk to a man eating a bag of potato chips while huddled in a doorway. Drury called the city's cold center in Over-the-Rhine to see if it was open. It was. She told the man. He said he would walk there.

Some outings don't yield as much personal contact. No two are the same.

On Wednesday afternoon, Drury and Troché put in a few more hours to visit homeless camps on the Cincinnati side of the Ohio River, just south of Mehring Way.

One camp was apparently home to three people. No one answered the greeting, "Outreach workers, anybody here?" The camp, enclosed by a makeshift tarp fence hanging from rope, featured three individual sleeping tents. The fire had been put out for the day. Three folding chairs encircled it.

Another camp farther west on the riverbank was home to another couple of people. A small New Testament reader sat on a dirty pillow case. A sleeping bag stretched out beneath a homemade tent covered by a bright blue tarp. "These are our pastries from last week," Troché said of the wrapped baked goods sitting atop a folded sleeping bag. He left two sandwiches, two bottles of water and a Lighthouse card.

"Want them to know we were here checking on them," he said.

A third camp spread out closer to the base of the Suspension Bridge. The social workers suspected it was the home of registered sex offenders because it was set apart from the relative cluster of other camps.

"There is a class system, even among the homeless," Troché said.

An abandoned switching house along the CSX railroad tracks, running parallel to Interstate 75 in St. Bernard, was another stop.

They parked the van at the end of a street and walked through the snow on a path to the tracks. They walked the rails to the brick building, now emblazoned with gang graffiti. They entered where a door had been removed to the lowest of the three levels. A squatter had set up a bed. About three dozen empty cans of Milwaukee's Best beer littered the space.

"Food," Drury said from a corner of the room, near a campfire. "Ramen noodles."

They did not leave a card or sandwiches. They wanted their first meeting to be in person. They plan to return to find out who is living there.

Relationships build over time, sometimes months, sometimes in the arc of a single outing.

The last stop Tuesday night was on Dunlap Street, a prostitution zone.

"Our girls look pretty bad," Troché said. "There is a lot of heroin. It's not like the East or West coasts."

The young prostitute they had met before 6 was in her spot some three hours later.

Drury steered the car toward the curb. Snow continued to fall. The slush was deeper.

This time, the woman approached more quickly. She took a sandwich, water, thick pair of new, white socks, gloves and a handful of condoms.

Drury leaned from the driver's seat to speak to the woman.

"Do you know about Off the Streets?" she said, asking about a diversion program for prostitutes with mental illness of drug addictions.

The woman shook her head but she did take the card from Lighthouse.

The wind gusted and kicked up more powdery snow. The woman shuffled her feet back across the slippery sidewalk toward a doorway.

Back to work.