

The Columbus Dispatch

Salvation Army offers helping hand for rural homeless

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BY GINA POTTHOFF

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

RICHWOOD, Ohio - Cynthia Jones and her 9-year-old son, Caleb, can be found most nights working the food concessions at ballgames in Richwood Park.

They live within walking distance of the park, so they can watch Caleb's sister, 14-year-old Chelsea, play softball.

But nine months ago, Jones didn't know where her family was going to live.

She was without a job after being let go from seasonal employment, her husband hadn't held a steady job for two years, and unemployment checks weren't paying the rent at their rural home on Rt.4 in Union County, about 45 miles northwest of Columbus. On a whim, Jones called a Salvation Army caseworker whose number a friend had given her.

Through Salvation Army's Direct Housing program, Jones received two months of financial assistance and nine months of budgeting advice - it could have been up to 12 months - from a counselor who visited her home every two weeks. Jones' lease was up on Sept.1, 2009, and the program got the family moved into a duplex a day later.

"We would've been struggling the whole time," Jones said. "I didn't know any (program) like that existed."

She said most people probably think homeless people don't live in rural central Ohio. She didn't.

The homeless in rural Ohio aren't publicly asking for money or living in Dumpsters, cardboard boxes or out of their cars, said Beth Fetzer-Rice, Salvation Army social-services director for central Ohio. They usually have shelter through friends or family, but it's not their own.

"People have this perception of people on the streets," Fetzer-Rice said. But "families are going to try and look for their own support networks. They realize, once they lose their housing . . . it jeopardizes their children."

Facing eviction, utility cutoffs or foreclosure, rural families can turn to the Salvation Army in Union County for help getting permanent housing through a program created in 2007. The program served 43 low-income families in 2008 and 2009. Nearly 90 percent maintained housing for at least six months.



ERIC ALBRECHT/DISPATCH

Caleb Jones, 9, and his mother, Cynthia Jones, spend a lot of time in Richwood Park in Union County. The county's Salvation Army helped the rural family of four find housing and assisted with bills and budgeting.

Because of its success, the Salvation Army and United Way program earned a \$2 million Department of Housing and Urban Development grant. The program will be re-created in 80 other Ohio counties, including Franklin and Delaware.

The Rapid Re-Housing Ohio grant, awarded in January, is meant to help 360 homeless families over three years. Three-quarters of the money is for client rent, transportation and other bills, including gas and electricity. The remaining dollars are for staffing.

Fetzer-Rice said Direct Housing differs from other homelessness-prevention programs because clients get money needed the first two months and counselors teach them throughout how to manage money by choosing what expenses are truly necessary.

"You can't just throw money at the problem," she said.

The program is for families who are homeless; have an income at or below 35 percent of the area median; and have more than one housing barrier, such as mental illness or living in an area where rent is expensive.

Once the Salvation Army helped with initial bills, gas and housing, Jones was able to catch up on other bills, pay for her vehicle and find a job at a mail-order pharmaceutical company. She works at home 40 hours a week and picks up shifts when she needs extra cash.

After counseling, Jones said she's wiser, spending money only on necessities instead of on cable TV and huge cell-phone plans. Her husband has not found permanent work yet, she said, but he picks up factory and building jobs from time to time. Jones is also proud to report that her family left the program in January.

"What I make pays everything," she said. The family will be able to go on vacation camping trips soon. "We're going to 'splurge.'"

gpotthoff@dispatch.com



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