

Amid a rise in homelessness, Catholic shelters work overtime to keep people safe

Orlando Soto smoked a cigarette and looked at his phone in a small fenced-in concrete courtyard outside Emmanuel House, an overflow men's homeless shelter in Providence, Rhode Island.

"I stay in all day. Sometimes I'll go to the store, to Dunkin Donuts or Wendy's, but most of the time, I'm inside the building," Soto, 54, said during a short cigarette break on a late-December weekday that was mild enough for him to be outside without a jacket.

"We got TV, Wi-Fi. We watch movies on our phones. It's alright, but it does stink to not be able to really go out," said Soto, who told Our Sunday Visitor that most places homeless people usually spend time during the day in Providence were closed or restricted because of COVID-19.

With nowhere for the homeless to go during a pandemic, shelters such as Emmanuel House, which is operated by the Diocese of Providence, are having to stay open around the clock, requiring staffers to work longer hours, driving up expenses for the Catholic social service agencies that operate them.

"The way COVID has hit us mostly, I would say, is financially. The staff is working pretty much day and night now. A lot of us haven't had a break since March," said Dotty Perreault, the director of Emmanuel House.

The novel coronavirus has also forced Catholic homeless shelters and their secular counterparts to reduce bed capacity in order to maintain social distancing inside the buildings, even as the economic fallout from the pandemic drives more

people into homelessness.

“We’ve been inundated with people who have never been in the system before, who for the first time are experiencing homelessness and not having food,” said Bruce Hackman, the San Pedro Regional Director for Catholic Charities of Los Angeles.

Hackman, who helps to operate two homeless shelters in Long Beach, California, told Our Sunday Visitor that he can sometimes see the fear in the eyes of some of the first-time homeless shelter residents.

Said Hackman, “You can tell they’re thinking, ‘How did I get in this situation?’”

‘Putting our lives on the line’

Sitting in a cluttered laundry room, wearing a cloth mask over her face, Perreault told Our Sunday Visitor about the nonstop cleaning and disinfecting that she and the staff have done at Emmanuel House in Providence since the coronavirus swept through the country last March.

“It is what it is. It’s a disease, a virus that can kill you,” Perreault said. “And if it doesn’t kill you, it can kill somebody close to you. That’s what I try to tell these guys, ‘You might be able to fight it off like a common cold. Will I?’”

As someone with a compromised immune system, Perreault is not sure. She also has an elderly mother at home, as do some of the other staff members.

“We’re literally putting our lives on the line everyday coming to work,” Perreault said. “It’s very important to keep our clients well in order to keep ourselves well.”

In addition to having hand sanitizer and extra face masks throughout the buildings, the staff and volunteers at homeless

shelters across the country have spaced out the beds and require that their residents stay 6 feet apart from each other at all times.

“We had to revamp (the shelter) completely,” Hackman said of the Project Achieve shelter in downtown Long Beach. Beds there are separated by partitions, and space has been set aside in the event that residents test positive for coronavirus and need to be quarantined.

“We offer testing at least once a week to the staff as well as the clients,” said Hackman, who also told Our Sunday Visitor that his shelter for homeless families is currently full and that an emergency program to house people in crisis is running out of money.

“I’ve been here for eight years now, and this is the worst I’ve seen it,” Hackman said.

‘To protect them and the community’

The challenges facing Catholic homeless shelters are similar in San Diego. The shelters there have also extended their hours of operation to accommodate people who otherwise would be out on the streets during the day.

“Since COVID hit, we couldn’t just send these people outside. What we did was keep them in, to protect them and the community,” said Appaswamy “Vino” Pajanor, the chief executive officer of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of San Diego.

“What was a 5-to-5, dusk-to-dawn kind of operation now all of a sudden became a 24-7 operation,” said Pajanor, who told Our Sunday Visitor that his agency had to add more personnel and acquire the personal protective equipment they needed to keep themselves and the residents safe.

With residents staying inside the shelters during the day, Pajanor said his agency is now providing them with three hot

meals a day. He said that housing the homeless population around the clock in a shelter requires “a higher level of case management” to deal with not only behavioral issues, substance abuse disorders or mental health needs, but to also offer support and soothe tensions during what is a stressful time for everybody.

“It’s not only that we have to do a higher level of health and safety precautions, but also carewise, so that these individuals, who are already in a vulnerable mental state, are not getting deeper into the darkness,” Pajanor said. “You have to show them the light.”

Deacon Jim Vargas, the president and CEO of Father Joe’s Villages in San Diego, told Our Sunday Visitor that his agency is one of two service providers that are managing shelter beds at a local convention center where he said people are socially distanced and provided meals and health care, and are screened daily for COVID symptoms and tested for the coronavirus.

“All the protocols that have been put in place have served us extremely well there,” Deacon Vargas told Our Sunday Visitor.

‘We’ve adapted’

Even with all the precautions, which also include COVID-19 testing every other week for the staff and residents, an outbreak happened at Emmanuel House in Providence in October. Eleven residents there tested positive for COVID-19 and were taken to a quarantine facility set up by the state department of public health.

“Right now, the (coronavirus) numbers are crazy,” Perreault said as public health statistics in mid-December indicated that Rhode Island had one of the highest daily rates in the world of coronavirus infections per 100,000 people.

“We’re having guys sleep now on every other bed, head to toe,” Perreault said, adding that everyone who enters the shelter

has their temperature taken and is required to take a shower before heading into the dorm area.

“We’ve adapted,” Perreault said, “But you don’t get used to knowing that there’s something fatal going around. ... You pray it doesn’t happen.”

Outside Emmanuel House, Soto finished smoking his cigarette before going inside for a haircut. Soto said he has spent almost a solid year inside the building, rarely venturing out except for the occasional donut or fast food hamburger.

“The food here ain’t that good,” Soto said, “But hey, it’s more than what a lot of people have.”

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