

September 9, 2007
The Homeless

County Takes Tough Stance on Shelters

By TIM MURPHY

WHITE PLAINS

RAVEN-HAIRED and rail-thin, Adriana Gaiser wore a gold necklace and hoop earrings. They seemed almost like marks of proud defiance, given the straits she was in.

At 43, Ms. Gaiser, an illegal immigrant who came to the United States from Colombia seven years ago, finds herself unemployed (she used to be a housekeeper in Rye), homeless (she shared an apartment with her boyfriend until they were evicted) and without treatment for cancer (she received the diagnosis four years ago). It's either lymphoma or leukemia, she's not sure which, but her legs are covered with bruises.

"When someone touches me, I bleed," she said, in uneven English. "I've lost 70 pounds." She pointed to her arm. "Day by day, I'm yellow, yellow, yellow."

Until early August, she could sleep in a women's shelter inside Grace Church, run by Grace Church Community Center with county funds. The church is a major provider of services for the homeless in White Plains, with a daytime outreach and drop-in center where Ms. Gaiser was interviewed.

But a month ago, the lives of Ms. Gaiser and about 70 to 80 homeless people in and around the city were upended when the county executive, [Andrew J. Spano](#), ordered the closing of a 43-bed men's shelter that had opened early last year in the basement of a county office building at 85 Court Street. Susan Tolchin, Mr. Spano's deputy, said the county was bowing to pressure from the city.

In addition, the county decreed that the men who had stayed there — and homeless men and women like them who remain outside the county's conventional shelter system — could no longer stay at the women's shelter or at two others in the city.

Paul Anderson-Winchell, executive director of the Grace Church group, said that it was defying the county's order by offering shelter to about 10 people, particularly women and the chronically ill, including Ms. Gaiser. "We felt they were too at-risk to leave on the streets," he said.

Kevin Mahon, the county social services commissioner, said that the group was flouting the county's ban but that he would not pull the group's funding because of it. "He knows that he's not supposed to take drop-ins," he said of Mr. Anderson-Winchell.

The decree has heightened longstanding tensions between White Plains and the county over the issue of homeless men and women who can't or won't enter the shelter system, which offers a place to sleep, counseling, help finding permanent housing and other services.

Some homeless people choose not to join because doing so requires them to participate in drug-treatment programs and to turn over a substantial portion of their income from jobs or public benefits. Others, like Ms. Gaiser, are barred because they lack legal identification.

Since the decree, about 40 of these so-called hard-core homeless have been guided into the conventional system, according to Grace Church workers and county social-service officials. But the rest — many substance-addicted, mentally ill or both — are still unaccounted for, sleeping in parks, garages, at friends' homes or wherever they can.

"We think there's a good percentage of those folks who eventually are going to be either victims or will hurt somebody because they're not on meds," Mr. Anderson-Winchell said.

Many have been drifting into two drop-in shelters in Yonkers, as well as onto streets downtown, said David Simpson, a spokesman for Mayor Philip A. Amicone. "It's become a real problem," Mr. Simpson said, adding that the shelters in Yonkers were already filled to capacity.

The closing of the White Plains men's shelter comes two summers after the fatal stabbing of a legal secretary in a downtown parking garage by a mentally ill homeless man, Phillip Grant, who confessed to the crime and is in prison. Mr. Grant slept at the shelter when it was at the Westchester County Airport in Purchase.

After the murder, Mayor Joseph Delfino of White Plains threatened to sue the county for dropping off shelter residents downtown every morning, leaving the men to seek services like those offered by the Grace Church group or to loiter around town until being bused back nightly to the airport.

Then, early last year, Mr. Spano moved the shelter to Court Street in White Plains, a few blocks from a new Main Street retail-residential strip and next door to Mulino's, a popular, Italian restaurant. Business owners protested and sued the county. Mr. Delfino, [a Republican](#), decried the move, calling it retribution from Mr. Spano, a Democrat, for threatening to sue.

Ms. Tolchin denied that charge last month, saying that the airport site, open for 13 years, had always been temporary. County attempts to relocate the Court Street site to a more outlying part of the city, or to nearby Hawthorne, fell apart under opposition.

Then came the announcement, early last month, that the Court Street site would close with no replacement lined up. Ms. Tolchin said that the county finally bowed to pressure from the city. But Deputy Mayor Paul Wood of White Plains said that the city never wanted to close the site without a replacement. “How could they just close the door on 60 people?” he asked. (Mr. Delfino called for the immediate closing of the shelter last year, but the city’s Common Council voted it down.)

With little communication between county, city and advocates since the shutdown, it is unclear when, or even if, a new site will emerge in White Plains for people outside the conventional system.

Ms. Tolchin said that when the weather gets cold the county plans to open “warming centers,” where people could sit in a chair overnight.

Mr. Anderson-Winchell says that’s not enough. “Giving people a chair so that they don’t freeze is certainly not meeting our obligation to society,” he said. He said the county should at a minimum allow his group to resume giving people outside the system empty beds at shelters.

As for Ms. Gaiser, she said that before the Grace Church group started slipping her in its back door, she slept on the streets. “Maybe the police will catch me again,” she said. She showed a ticket, dated the night before and marked “criminal trespass,” that she said she got from a police officer who found her sleeping on a box in the parking facility at The Westchester, a mall downtown.

“It’s not easy for a man,” she said of her situation, “but for a lady, it’s really difficult.”

Nearby, in front of the county building on Court Street where the shelter had been, some passers-by said they remembered homeless people congregating outside.

“Did they close it?” asked Hyacinth Williams, a White Plains resident who works at a nearby hospital. “Don’t you think they should have found some place else for them before they did that? Nobody living on the street is safe.”

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