

Baltimore County Homeless Shelter Under New Control

Stephanie Marudas - WYPR

BALTIMORE, MD (2008-06-30) Starting tomorrow, Baltimore County's east side homeless shelter will be under new control. The county decided not to renew its contract with St. Vincent de Paul, an independent faith-based non-profit organization known for its work with the homeless in Baltimore City. WYPR's Stephanie Marudas reports.

A promising partnership was on the horizon last summer when Baltimore County contracted with St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore to run its 24-hour shelter for homeless families and single women under the name Sarah's Hope. But the relationship soured.

The way we interpreted our contract was obviously different from the way they interpreted their contract.

Mary Harvey runs Baltimore County's Office of Community Conservation.

This was not a grant agreement where we said you run a great program, here's a little bit of money to help you do that. We said No.' We were contracting to shelter 150 people a night and to do a day resource program.

Harvey says St. Vincent de Paul didn't run the county facility as an emergency shelter, or occupy it at full capacity come nighttime.

We have about 500 beds throughout the county any given night that are full. And I need to have those 150 at the east side full because there is a demand for it.

St. Vincent de Paul executive director John Schiavone says his organization didn't enter the contract with the county to run an emergency drop-in shelter.

With a drop-in center, it's really first-come, first-serve. And so the approach we had proposed with the county a year ago and why we were asked to run it as a 24-hour center was to do it in a more comprehensive way. Where you are able to work with a family over a course of time, provide that stabilization but still with focus on rapidly re-housing them within a four to six month period.

Under that arrangement, Schiavone says St. Vincent de Paul aimed to serve up to 150 people throughout the day.

That's what they thought was a good idea a year ago. I think over the course of the year with the amount of people needing shelter, they realized, that retrospectively they really just need to focus on a drop-in shelter, and maximize the utilization of amount of beds they have. And so that doesn't leave a place for Sarah's Hope. That's not what we feel is the best way to approach serving families.

After 10 months running the 24-hour county shelter, Schiavone says St. Vincent de Paul moved 81 adults and children out of the shelter into permanent or transitional housing. Other services offered included linking shelter residents with resources for job training, education, and health care.

We still feel our concept is a needed service in Baltimore County. It's just not going to happen in a county facility anymore.

Schiavone says St. Vincent de Paul is aiming to reopen a smaller version of Sarah's Hope at a new location by the fall. Among those invested in the future of St. Vincent de Paul's work in Baltimore County are the 400 volunteers at Sarah's Hope who are affiliated with 40 different county churches. Trinity Episcopal Church Reverend Jim Ransom helps run the Sarah's Hope Coalition of volunteers.

It's not surprising to me that we have in serving the homeless have become homeless ourselves as Sarah's Hope. And I'm hoping that will make us a richer community of service and that we can learn from that experience ourselves to be more compassionate.

Baltimore County officials would welcome the re-opening of Sarah's Hope, but haven't committed any financial support at this time. They say the county needs both an emergency drop-in shelter and a longer-term comprehensive homeless outreach center like Sarah's Hope. Starting tomorrow, the Community Assistance Network or CAN will take control of the county's east side shelter. CAN will defer to Baltimore County's social services personnel from the Young Parent Support Center to handle daytime case management and link shelter residents with job training, education, and health care services.

I'm Stephanie Marudas, reporting in Baltimore County, for 88.1, WYPR.

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