

CHICAGO TRIBUNE HOLIDAY GIVING

CHARITIES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Homeless are given chance to reconnect

By Lisa Black
Tribune staff reporter

Joe Collier doesn't wait for the homeless to show up at the doorsteps of Lake Street Church in Evanston. Instead, he seeks them out, handing out sack lunches and CTA passes.

Although the church basement serves as ground zero for Connections for the Homeless, Collier, a caseworker for the agency, finds that some people are afraid or unaware of how to get help.

"Sometimes you ask how they're doing and they say, 'I'm terrible. I haven't eaten in a week and I'm homeless,'" said Collier, who makes his rounds by bicycle in the summer. He introduces himself, chats for a few minutes and without being pushy or judgmental, offers his card if someone shows interest in additional help.

Besides the outreach effort, Connections has overseen a year-round overnight shelter called Hilda's Place since 1984. The agency also has a housing program for single parents and offers financial help to families at risk of losing their homes. People also can drop in during

designated times for hot meals, showers or assessment at the church at Lake Street and Chicago Avenue.

In 2004, Connections programs served 2,619 people, with a majority of its \$1.6 million in expenses funded through private grants and donations, according to its annual report.

The organization receives funds through Chicago Tribune Holiday Giving, a campaign of Chicago Tribune Charities, a McCormick Tribune Foundation Fund.

"We were living out of little Tupperware storage boxes," said Debra Coleman, 44, recalling the days before Connections placed her family in an apartment.

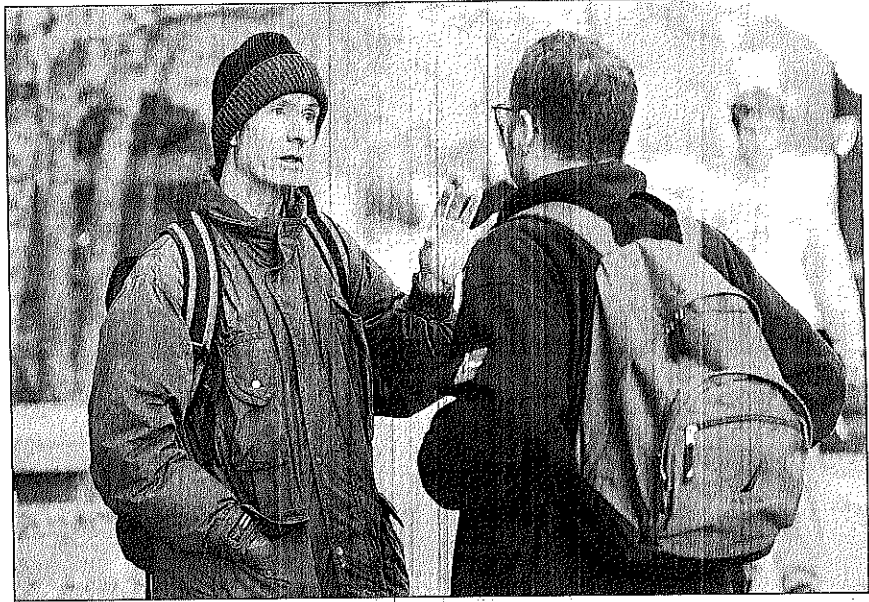
She hopped from one family's living room to another for eight months after she lost her job in 2001. At the time, she was a single mother of a toddler and pregnant with her second daughter.

"It was very difficult," said Coleman, who added that her daughter used to blow the fluff from milkweed seedpods and wish for a home. "We were staying in everyone's living room. Whenever they had company, it was uncomfortable."

Over the next 18 months, Coleman trained for a new job and worked before she was able to afford her own co-op unit in Evanston. Her former Connections apartment was one of seven scattered throughout the city that are reserved for single-parent families, said Jill Longnecker, program coordinator.

In other cases, success is more difficult to measure, Collier said.

Recently, he had to take a client to a Chicago shelter because the man had been at Hilda's Place for a year, Collier said.



Tribune photo by David Trotman-Wilkins
Michael Brown (left), who is homeless, speaks with Joe Collier, a caseworker with Connections for the Homeless, a transitional and outreach agency based in Evanston.

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CHICAGOLAND'S GIFT

Most of the residents there stay an average of four months and sleep in bunk beds and complete assigned chores.

Residents, all of whom are single adults, leave at 7 a.m. for jobs, rehabilitation programs or other training and return by 6 p.m. for dinner, said Kevin Foss, coordinator of adult housing services.

Community volunteers prepare nearly every dinner from the church kitchen. A medical director helps coordinate health services, provided by paid and volunteer physicians. Slightly worn couches and

colorfully painted walls throughout Hilda's Place create a homey atmosphere. But signs on a bulletin board such as "How to get a job when you've got a criminal background" underscore that the facility is a transitional place for its residents.

During the day, Connections works with area churches that provide warming centers for homeless people at rotating locations from November through March.

Recently, Bethany Baptist Church became the first center of the season as about 20 people

gathered for chili, cornbread and conversation.

"I tell them at the end of every year, I hope I don't see you next year," Rev. Jesse Sharp said jokingly. He recognized only a half dozen people from last year.

One of the visitors was Steve Williams, 47, who got his hair trimmed by Leon Hall, a volunteer.

"It's all about keeping hope alive," said Williams, who said he is looking for a job and apartment after his seasonal work ended. "If there's anything I am, it's determined."

Hall, 36, was also homeless before receiving help from a similar program in Chicago. He and his wife, Valerie, volunteer at the warming center to give back to the community, she said.

"We slept in the car," said Valerie Hall, 35, whose husband is disabled. "I had two young children. It was unbearable. We couldn't do it anymore."

Besides the physical difficulties, being homeless "breaks you down, mentally," Hall said. "It's not just having a key to stick in a door. It's belittling. I hurts you. ... Sometimes you feel like giving up."

The family now is able to rent a three-bedroom apartment with Valerie Hall working as a child-care provider.

"We try to give back whatever we can," she said.
lblack@tribune.com

HOW TO CONTACT US

Comments, questions and suggestions about articles in this section are welcome.

Write:

Susan Richardson, bureau chief
616 Atrium Drive, Suite 200
Vernon Hills, IL 60061

Call: 847-918-2819

Fax: 847-918-9561

Or e-mail:

northshore@tribune.com