

## Multiple efforts needed to get people off the street and under cover

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Most Sunday mornings, Patricia Petty takes a bus to Mass at St. Pius X in Rodgers Forge.

She was close enough to walk to that liturgy a year ago, but in no shape to do so, as alcoholism had the 56-yearold, a product of Catholic schools and mother of two adult daughters, living under a bush in Chinquapin Park, along Northern Parkway.

“I slept on some cardboard, and had plastic to keep me dry,” Petty said. “Nobody really noticed me. When you’re homeless, you’re invisible.”

On a rainy morning in mid-February, Petty was warm, dry and downright spry after nine months of sobriety and another solid night of sleep at Marian House, which gives women whose challenges have included homelessness the skills and resources they need to “become productive and contributing citizens.” According to the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, Maryland had an estimated 6,500 people experiencing that in January 2019. According to St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore, however, that figure is 4,000 “on any given night in the Baltimore area” alone. Whatever the scope, Catholic agencies and parishes are doing something about it.

‘My space’ Founded in 1982 as a joint project of the Sisters of Mercy and the School Sisters of Notre Dame to assist women leaving incarceration, Marian House has provided help to more than 2,600 women. Over the last generation, that has included their children, more than 800, through transitional and permanent supportive housing.

“They’ve all experienced homelessness at some time,” Katie Allston, executive director of Marian House, said of its clients. “They’ve slept in a car or an abandoned

house or sought a shelter because they have other issues that need to be addressed.

“Ninety-five percent of our women have substance abuse issues and 80 percent have a chronic mental illness. Eighty percent have experienced domestic abuse, and 70 percent have been incarcerated. More than half don’t have a high school diploma and more than half experienced childhood sexual assault.”

Petty checked some of those boxes during her intake at Marian House.

She attended the parish school at Immaculate Conception in Towson and Towson Catholic High School, and left what is now Notre Dame of Maryland University to go into sales. Petty divorced in 2006, and her alcoholism worsened after her father died in 2013. Her bipolar disorder received irregular treatment, and her brushes with the law included resisting arrest.

“When I was drinking, I wasn’t a happy person,” Petty said. “I was screaming at people all the time. ... I became unemployable. I would beg for



Patricia Petty, who spent five years on the street due to an addiction to alcohol, gives thanks for her new life to the staff of Baltimore’s Marian House.

apartment,” Allston said. Like new

change for alcohol.”

She drank “enough so I could pass out for a while. When you wake up, you’ve got to move around just to stay warm. ... A lot of places don’t want you in there, because of the way I looked and smelled.”

Petty has been sober since last May 14, when “she took a drink just to get dressed that day to go to the hospital. One of last people who was talking to me who had a vehicle got me down to (Johns Hopkins) Bayview. I got into detox. It was terrible.”

After a stretch in a shelter, Petty joined a tour for prospective volunteers at Marian House’s main location, on the campus of the former St. Bernard Parish. Now she has a room there.

“It’s my space,” Petty said. “I haven’t had a space in so long.”

Just as vital as that security are the counseling and support available to residents, which includes therapy, education and employment assistance.

“People need more than just an

Petty came to Marian House from the Helping Up Mission on Baltimore Street, east of a stretch of similar agencies. They include the Our Daily Bread Employment Center, the most visible example of a Catholic Charities of Baltimore network that stretches from Anne Arundel to Harford counties, and Health Care for the Homeless.

The latter’s collaborative partners include St. Vincent de Paul Parish, just to the south, at the bottom of the Fallsway. Health Care for the Homeless places clients in accommodations.

The parish’s Resource Exchange lessens their out-of-pocket expenses by supplying furniture, bedding,

towels, kitchen supplies and other

household items.

The parish donates approximately \$35,000 to the effort annually, which includes purchasing new beds and renting three storage units on Howard Street. Settling two or three households

a week, it has served nearly 900

individuals and families.

remnants of retirement home rummage sales.

“The quality of some of these pieces is unbelievable,” said Kathy Wellman, who learned about the outreach from the bulletin at St. Isaac Jogues in Carney.

On site, volunteers help assemble beds and remove doors to make way for larger pieces. Most live in the suburbs, but know of the legacy of St. Vincent de Paul Parish, which plans to reopen, during the day, an adjoining park to the homeless.

Peggy Cronyn coordinates an effort that involves 40 volunteers. She’s typical of the crew, in that she’s retired. Her career in nonprofits included Catholic Charities, Catholic Relief Services and Health Care for the Homeless.

“Sometimes people lose the community they’re coming from, and settle in a different part of the city,” Cronyn said. “This helps.”

### Welcome the stranger

Jason Gill and Brandi Gaver awoke Christmas morning in the first floor of a row home two blocks from Coppin University. It was a desperately welcome contrast to a camp for the home-less, along the Gwynns Falls under Interstate 95, where they bedded down Thanksgiving Day.

That November night, however, included hope, in the form of the welcome they received at Transfiguration Catholic Community. The helpers at its hot Thanksgiving meal for those in need included parishioners from its sister par-

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On Mondays, volunteers assemble “household kits” at the parish. On Thursdays, they are transferred, along with larger donated items, to the storage facility. A moving van and crew meet the volunteers there, where they go about outfitting several households.

Armed with a tape measure and clipboard that included slips listing the Mass schedule at St. Vincent de Paul, Peggy Meyer looked over wish lists for two households that between them totaled five children. Her crew sidestepped heavy dining room sets, often



Top: St. Vincent de Paul Church, Baltimore, Resource Exchange volunteers Joe McFadden and Kathy Wellman sort through lamps to furnish a home. Left: Peggy Meyer, a volunteer with the Resource Exchange, visits with a recipient of donated furniture and kitchen supplies during a Feb. 4 delivery to Baltimore’s Reservoir Hill neighborhood.