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## Finding Safe & Stable Housing for Families

*April, 2018*

A teddy bear dressed in a tutu sits on a windowsill, waiting to welcome a little girl who one day soon will occupy the room. This image immediately conveys the spirit of comfort and refuge that Catholic Family Center (CFC) hopes to bring to women and their children who will be sheltered at our recently re-opened Sanctuary House in Rochester, NY. However, recent changes to homeless services in New York State are making it more difficult for CFC to receive sufficient funding and reimbursement to provide shelter and refuge to that little girl and her family, and for the amount of time that may be required to find them safe and stable housing.

Catholic Family Center is the largest provider of shelter services in Monroe County, New York (the Salvation Army is the next largest provider). We operate three shelters: Francis Center, for men; Sanctuary House, for women and women with children; and Place of Hope, for single women, women with children, and intact families. I'd like to share with you some concerning facts about homelessness in our county, some of the impact we have experienced as a result of the recent changes to homeless services in NYS, and my biggest areas of concern and advocacy. My hope is that we may all be able to understand this issue more clearly as we seek to identify an effective way to meet the needs of these most vulnerable individuals, families and children in our communities.

In 2016, the number of those qualifying for emergency shelter services in Monroe County rose 4% from 2015 to over 7,800 individuals. Catholic Family Center served 3,832 of these, or 49% of the total. In addition, CFC provides over 2,500 hospitality nights annually, where the individuals are not 'qualified' from the County's perspective, but they are indeed homeless; so CFC offers shelter with no compensation. Increasingly, we are encountering individuals and families from areas of concentrated poverty in the Rochester urban neighborhoods. Of special concern is the increase in homelessness experienced by children in Rochester, which rose from just over 5% in 2011 to 9% in 2016. Let me put that another way: during 2016, 8.8% of all the children in Rochester were recorded as homeless, with those finding refuge with their family in a shelter staying about 17 days. The majority of these children are the 'hidden homeless' with 78% "couch surfing" with friends or extended family - sometimes with their families, sometimes not.

While our ultimate goal at CFC is to help clients and their children find stable and safe housing, oftentimes, these families experience barriers that significantly



influence their ability to find and secure the help they need. Individualized care and case management, such as those services provided by CFC, have proven effective to help families break the cycle of homelessness and poverty, but the path can be complex and involve not only expert support to navigate the system of options, but also time.

Over the last several years, two significant economic barriers have emerged for these families: 1) the lack of affordable housing and 2) a declining job market for those with a high school education or less. The fact is that the economic recovery in our country since the recession in 2008 presents a special challenge for those with a limited education: while over 8.6 million jobs have been created for those with a bachelor's degree or higher, those with a high school education or less experienced a loss of 5.5 million jobs. (jobs for those with an associate's degree or "some" college experienced a modest increase in job growth) And, those jobs that are available to this population do not pay the wage required for a safe and affordable 2-bedroom rental unit in Rochester. In order to afford the rent, a person would have to earn \$16.60 per hour of full time employment. Combined with the added challenges of planning for transportation and childcare while at work, achieving stability and growth when starting from a position of homelessness and joblessness is fraught with instability and risk.

Serving this population has become increasingly difficult in light of the impact we have experienced from changes in homeless services policy:

- NY State now classifies emergency housing as "temporary housing assistance", and reimbursement policies now reflect a very temporary nature of supporting people in crisis and trauma.
- Regulatory changes have required us to increase staff at shelters with children, and subject the shelter to a licensing process of a year or more before reimbursement at a proper rate begins.
- We are observing an increase in unreimbursed or underfunded stays in shelters.

Further reductions to the HUD budget are likely, and will exacerbate this challenge. During this time, I ask simply that you learn more about the facts and human impact surrounding this issue. It is complex, and while I fervently believe that it is possible to break the cycle of homelessness and poverty, a long-term systems approach and understanding is required.

CFC operates three shelters in Monroe County: Francis Center, for men; Sanctuary House, for women and women with children; and Place of Hope, for single women, women with children, and intact families. In 2017, our shelters served 2,688 people, 26% of whom were children. Our two shelters for women and children or families served 1671 people, 42% of whom were children.

Carol Wheeler, who serves as director of housing for the City of Rochester, is a strong advocate for the homeless in our city, and has said that the community is blessed to have

CFC. "When it comes to the things that are taking place in Rochester as it relates to the homeless and providing service to them, Catholic Family Center is always right there to lend their expertise and their support," Wheeler said. "And they get results."

As we continue to serve families facing these challenges, I request your understanding, your advocacy, and your prayers.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marlene Bessette". The script is cursive and elegant.

Marlene Bessette  
President and CEO  
Catholic Family Center