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Anne Arundel County Parish Winter Relief Program Provides an Opportunity to Serve

In the first 39 days of 2018, temperatures have been below freezing thirty times, making life even more difficult for people experiencing homelessness. Fortunately in Anne Arundel County, there is the Winter Relief program.

Winter Relief is a community-based response to serving the homeless in the county operated by local churches for the last 26 years. Churches provide overnight shelter to individuals and families from late October until early April. The program rotates to a different host site each week, providing dinner and breakfast and shelter from evening to morning each day. Last week, Winter Relief was held at St. John Neumann in Annapolis, the mission church for St. Mary's, one of 11 Catholic parishes taking part in the program.

"This is a tremendous program. You get people out of the cold and off the street during the night," said Gregg Jackson, one of the daily coordinators at St. Mary's. "The generosity of the people that serve them and the interaction we have is absolutely priceless. Every volunteer finds it to be a great experience."

St. Mary's served approximately 30 homeless men and women each night. Under the direction of Sam Davies, hundreds of volunteers were on-site to supervise and coordinate. Guests were fed, had their clothes washed, and given a chance to shower.

"People want to do something, they really do," said St. Mary's parishioner Mary Ann Davies. "We get so much out of it. The main thing is to have a really warm, welcoming atmosphere, so our guests feel extremely well-cared for. We have a lot of food, put out snacks all night long and beverages are available from the moment they arrive to the time they leave."

In order to take advantage of the program, each participant is required to comply with the policies and procedures of the Arundel House of Hope, which provides support services for the homeless, including a daily breathalyzer test.

Sam Schwallenberg, an unemployed carpenter, had never heard of Winter Relief until last week. He stayed four nights and was impressed with the operation.

"I have never met better people. They have treated me like family and the food was awesome," Schwallenberg said. "It can be difficult to better yourself and try to find a job when you are freezing and have nowhere to go. It is not easy getting back on the right path when you become homeless. To have a place like this is extremely helpful."

"It is a great relationship. They are very appreciative," added Jackson. "When it is really bitterly cold and they have moved on from us, I just pray they are somewhere warm. The thing that is most rewarding is getting a chance to speak to them face-to-face and find out their stories."

The volunteers last Thursday night included dozens of St. Mary's High School students who served dinner and played bingo with the guests.



The Anne Arundel County Winter Relief program has been helping people experiencing homelessness for 26 years.

"The [students'] feedback is always, 'I have so much. Why are they so happy when they have nothing?' The type of environment they create here allows the kids to have a learning experience," said Ginny Dauses, the head of the school's campus ministry. "I tell the kids we don't get much exposure to this. So to have the opportunity to see these folks not just as someone they see on the street, but have the chance to make a human connection is huge."

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN MARYLAND SERVES AND ADVOCATES FOR THE POOR, VULNERABLE AND THOSE IN NEED NOT BECAUSE THEY ARE CATHOLIC, BUT BECAUSE WE ARE CATHOLIC.