

COTS provides important, possibly lifesaving service

by Lou O'Malley · originally published in the Green Bay Press Gazette · January 22, 2006
reprinted in "My Dissent: From First to Last" by Lou O'Malley · 2007

Over the years, I have probably written more columns about homelessness than any other topic. One of the things I have tried to point out is that there is no monolithic cause or cure for homelessness.

There are many causes, each requiring a different analysis and a different solution. Perhaps even – to a social Darwinian – no solution at all.

The reply to the social Darwinians will be left to another column. Let's assume that we agree that society must find a solution.

There's a private group in Green Bay who have defined a certain population of homeless people and who have taken it on themselves to supply a solution for that part of the problem.

They call themselves the COTS (Churches Offering Temporary Shelter) program. COTS has been running since mid-November in a church in downtown Green Bay. It offers a bare minimum of survival assets for people who might otherwise spend the night outside; i.e., COTS supplies a bed, blanket and a warm and safe place to sleep for the night.

COTS does not pretend to have the answer to the problem of homelessness in general, or even to the particular part of the problem they address. What the people at COTS know, though, is that a Green Bay night can be lethal, so they provide a place to come in out of the cold.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should tell you that, although I am only tangentially involved in the group, Karina is deeply involved, and the initial funding came from funds left when Crossroads closed.

COTS is made up of representatives from a variety of Green Bay churches as well as social service organizations, including The Crisis Center, Health Care for the Homeless, St. Vincent de Paul and Streetlights Outreach.

COTS is serving about 20 people a night and, from what I've been able to gather, the folks at COTS are somewhat surprised at the makeup of the population they're serving.

As you know, a significant part of the homeless population also suffers from active alcoholism. In the beginning, the people in the COTS program suspected that the majority of their efforts would go toward helping that population. They expected to see the stereotypical homeless person – the vagrants who wander the alleys and streets of any city's Skid Row – unkempt, ragged and smelling of alcohol.

Although some of that population seeks the help COTS can offer, that is not the largest population that has sought the services of COTS. The population that seems to need COTS for survival is the population with mental health problems.

From years at Crossroads, I know that this can be the most difficult part of the homeless population to help. Generally, the first impulse is to insist that the mentally ill be placed in institutions with or without their consent.

Historically, however, this approach has been disastrous. In fact, the approach is generally illegal. A mentally ill person must be a danger to himself or herself or others before he or she can be deprived of liberty. Institutionalization without consent is a dangerous process in any society. It is therefore, in our society, a complicated and lengthy process in most cases. And rightly so, at least in my mind.

The COTS people have taken it as part of their mission to include this population in the group that they serve. It is a tough and frequently thankless task. In my experience, very often the mentally ill have run out of family or friends who are willing to help them. At least as often, they have rejected the help of family and friends.

The people at COTS have taken as part of their mission the task of keeping these people alive. Perhaps, you agree with me that that is no small thing.

Perhaps you might want to help. If you do, give COTS a call.