

Shelters lack space as winter approaches

Officials are calling on churches to house those squeezed by overcrowding

By Rita Price

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Last fall, as homeless women poured into Faith Mission to escape a cold snap, late arrivals often had to make do with a floor mat, plastic chair or — on the worst nights — propping themselves against a wall.

“We just crowded them in,” Executive Director Sue Villilo said. “It wasn’t good or comfortable for anyone.”

Demand probably won’t be any less with this year’s cold weather, so shelter system officials have asked local churches to take turns providing about 30 extra beds for single women.

The option also is being considered as a way to cut costs and ease crowding at the YWCA Family Center, which was built in 2005 for 50 families but continues to serve more than 100 at its site, near Leonard and



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Qwennita Frazier, a 22-year-old originally from Memphis, Tenn., spent last night at the Faith Mission shelter on Long Street.

E. 5th avenues, and at nearby motels, YWCA spokeswoman Patti O'Toole said.

"They're afraid that this is the new normal," she said. "The trends have been completely unpredictable."

O'Toole said the only plan in place so far is for single women. Starting Nov. 15, Living Peace Church of the Brethren on the Northwest Side is to take the first four-week shift, opening its doors to provide extra shelter capacity as needed, said Justin North, chairman of the church board.

The church has a retreat area with plenty of beds and shower facilities, and other nearby churches plan to help with meals, North said.

"It's our first venture into homelessness," he said of the church's outreach work. "But the big issue for our church has always been social justice, and this fits right in."

A local corporation is providing a van, North said, and the YWCA — which already works on housing for women — will manage the effort.

"This brings new partners to the table, which is terrific," Villilo said. "Everybody taking different pieces, I think, is a great plan."

Although winter expansion is typical for shelters, year-round demand and a surge in the homeless population have complicated efforts.

The YWCA family shelter, for example, used to have enough extra space during the school year to open some rooms for single women.

With that option gone, the Community Shelter Board turned to churches. For men, the shelter board will again provide dozens of extra winter beds in the former Mid-Ohio Foodbank site on W. Mound Street.

Villilo said putting extra beds for both men and women at that site last year was tough.

"What we're trying to avoid is so much crowding in the shelters," she said.

Families with children can't be turned away, no matter the weather, so the tab for temporary motel stays has been climbing.

"In 2011, if we follow the current trend, they say we will have spent about \$1.2 million on overflow," O'Toole said.

Using churches would slash that cost. But officials are mindful of comparisons to the old YWCA Interfaith Hospitality Network, which shuttled families to various churches each night. "We're not returning to the old model at all," O'Toole said.

If churches are used temporarily to help the family shelter system, officials want to partner with those nearby so that families could easily travel, or walk, between the church and YWCA Family Center.

O'Toole also said the YWCA recently hired two new case managers, for a total of five, and a landlord specialist to help move families into housing faster.

No matter the role that churches play this fall and winter, North said his congregation feels good about the effort.

"To open your doors to complete strangers is a big step forward," he said. "We hope to be an inspiration."

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