

Church Shelters Open

Interfaith Council's program adds up to 100 beds for homeless

By Rachel Gordon

SAN FRANCISCO — Operators of the city's homeless shelters are bracing for a new surge of people seeking refuge from the streets when the latest round of welfare cuts takes effect next week.

Meanwhile, a special winter shelter program opened over the weekend to provide temporary overnight accommodations in local churches for up to 100 homeless men.

In addition, 30 more beds for families will be made available at the Civic Center Residence Facility on McAllister Street and a handful of other contract hotels during the upcoming cold-weather months.

The extra beds are helpful, say the homeless and their advocates, but far from enough.

"Of course we aren't going to be able to shelter everyone, but we are doing what we can," said Rita Semel, executive vice chair of the San Francisco Interfaith Council, a coalition of local churches and synagogues, which sponsors the

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Interfaith Shelter Locations

Six churches in the Interfaith Emergency Shelter Program will open their doors to single homeless men during the winter months. These are in addition to the other emergency shelters operated year-round in the city.

Capacity at the churches is limited, so space will be provided on a first come, first served basis. Most shelter sites will open each night at 7 p.m. The only exception is First Congregational Church, which will open at 6 p.m. Dinner and breakfast will be provided.

Following is a list of the churches and the dates they will operate as shelters.

- Nov. 22 — Nov. 28: First Congregational Church, 432 Mason St. at Post Street. Capacity is 100.

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winter shelter project.

"I'd love to take care of everybody that comes to us, but the places we're using aren't made of rubber. There just isn't room."

Under the program, six churches will open their doors at night for 60 to 100 men — depending on the size of the facility — through March 14.

In past years, the program has been a savior for people whose only other options were to sleep on the streets, in abandoned buildings or in cars.

"What we're doing now is looking for ways to at least help out during the holiday season," said Mayor Frank Jordan, who on Friday gave the city's official blessing to the winter shelter project.

Participating congregations, aided by corporate donations, will provide meals — and, whenever possible, grooming supplies and clothes — for homeless people at the makeshift shelters. Volunteers also are being recruited to read to the children and help out with after-school activities.

"This is the fifth year that the San Francisco religious community has responded by providing additional shelter during the cold and rainy months," said the Rev. Richard Schaper, pastor of St. Mark's Lutheran Church and chair of the Interfaith Council.

"While we want to respond to the emergency needs, we also are looking for ways in which we can help to find permanent solutions to the problems of homelessness, such as transitional and permanent low-cost housing," he said.

An estimated 6,000 to 10,000 homeless people live in San Francisco, according to government officials and social services providers.

Roughly 1,700 emergency beds are available year-round in the city, on top of the winter shelter beds.

The need is expected to increase sometime after Dec. 1, when Aid to Families with Dependent Children benefits will be cut for the second time this year, bringing the total reductions to more than 10 percent since the summer of 1991.

Under the latest cuts, a family consisting of a mother and two chil-

dren, for example, would see its monthly welfare check reduced from \$633 to \$624 — enough to put some families over the edge into financial chaos, say their advocates.

The last major reductions saw demand for emergency shelter rise, as people no longer were able to afford rent.

"I'm sure we'll see similar ramifications from the new round of cuts," said Bill Mack of Independent Housing Services, which tracks the number of people turned away from emergency shelters each month in San Francisco.

The organization's latest report, which included data from the months of June, July and August, shows that 43,150 people were turned away — more than three times the number of people that came up empty in their quest for a bed the year before.

In addition to the welfare cuts, the rumored closing of the Transbay Terminal at Mission and Main streets during late-night hours also has people worried.

The state Department of Transportation, which operates the facility, has threatened to close the building to the public during the middle of the night.

"Unfortunately, a lot of people use the Transbay Terminal and other public buildings as shelter," said Liz Resner, executive director of Travelers Aid, which runs a federally financed homeless outreach program at the site.

"If the Transbay Terminal is closed, there will be a lot of people without a place to sleep, and that's going to have a dramatic impact not only on them, but on the surrounding neighborhood," she said.

Resner estimates that 50 to 200 people lodge at the transit center nightly.

Jordan said he hopes that a couple of new city programs, which are scheduled to come on line soon, will help put a dent in the problem. They include:

- A rent payee program for the homeless mentally ill who receive federal Supplemental Security payments, a type of welfare grant that adds up to more than \$700 a month.

Under the program, rent money for a residential hotel room would be automatically deducted from the participants' entitlement checks to en-

sure that the person has a place to sleep. The idea is to prevent government aid recipients from spending their rent money on such things as drugs and alcohol.

Larry Cruz, the mayor's point man on homeless issues, said the city has earmarked \$435,000 for the program, which would help 400 people at a time. The money would not pay for actual rent, but for case management services for participants, and for administration.

- A County Veterans Services Office, which would help homeless veterans obtain government benefits due them. Jordan estimates that 35 percent of the people who live on the streets served in the military.

Jordan said implementation of those two programs alone could free hundreds of beds in emergency shelters.

"We're trying to find compassionate solutions to an overwhelming problem," said Jordan.

The mayor has been under attack by some of the city's more outspoken homeless advocates for not spending enough resources on getting people into permanent shelter, and for emphasizing police response to people who sleep in the parks and beg on the streets.

The mayor said he's hoping the new Democratic administration in Washington, D.C. will funnel more money into San Francisco and other urban areas to provide homeless people with services they need.

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- Nov. 29 — Dec. 12: Trinity Episcopal Church, 1668 Bush St. at Gough Street. Capacity is 60.

- Dec. 13 — Dec. 26: St. Mary's Cathedral, 1111 Gough St., off Geary Boulevard. Capacity is 100.

- Dec. 27 — Jan. 9: First Congregational Church, 432 Mason St. at Post Street. Capacity is 100.

- Jan. 10 — Jan. 30: St. Paulus Lutheran Church, 950 Gough St. at Eddy Street. Capacity is 60.

- Jan. 31 — Feb. 27: First Unitarian Church, 1187 Franklin St. at Geary Boulevard. Capacity is 80.

- Feb. 28 — March 14: St. Mark's Lutheran Church, 1111 O'Farrell St. Capacity is 60.

For additional information, including referrals for women and children and families, call 863-3893.