

Metro

Bag ladies': the homeless, helpless

losing of only two
county shelters
as their numbers

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She is about 30, tall and thin, looking to herself as she roams the streets.

"I don't want to discuss the situation! I don't want to discuss the situation!" she shouted to herself, waving her arms and shaking her head as she shuffled down Spurgeon Street in Santa Ana.

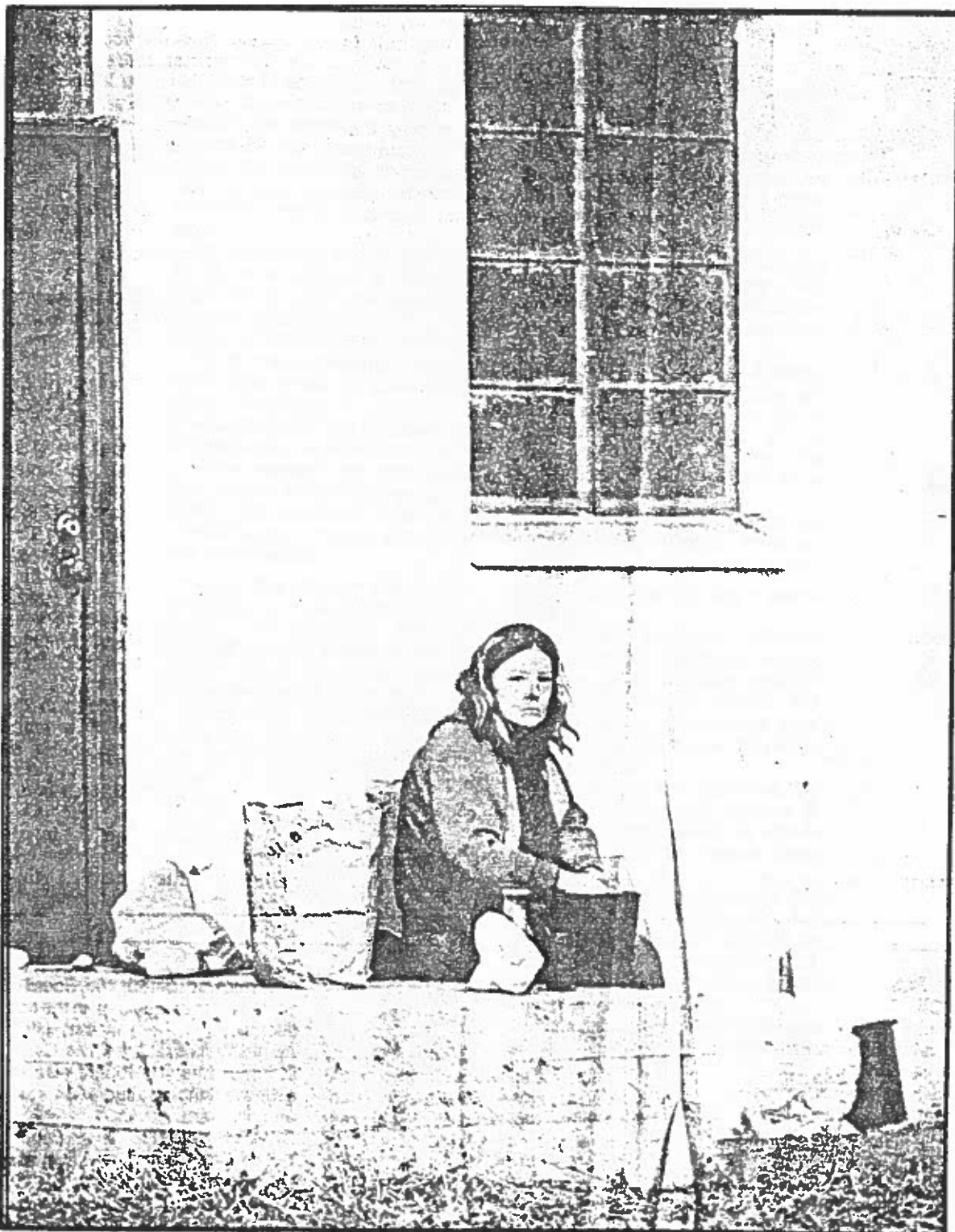
Across the street, a middle-aged woman and her teen-aged daughter stopped to stare at the man in burgundy denims, a green-striped sweater, yellow flip-flops and a peach-colored Panama.

Inable to hold a job because of an apparent mental illness, she spends her days wandering Orange County, mile upon mile in a single day. She rarely talks to others.

He spends her evenings in all-night restaurants and sleeps in bushes at a neighborhood park or on doorsteps of churches. In an all-too-common sight, she is one of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of unattached women who make their homes on the streets of Orange County — so-called "bag ladies." Estimates on homeless women in the county range from 450 to 3,500.

Street women have become more visible in the past two months because of the recent closing of the county's only two shelters for them, said Jean Bath, chairman of the Orange County Human Relations Commis-

"We're seeing more and more of the bag ladies all the time," said Bath, who also directs Share Selves, a non-profit Costa



Charlaine Brown/The Register

A woman sits on the steps outside a closed Santa Ana YWCA on a recent morning.

UNWANTED: 'Like airports, dumps and trains,' no one wants them, Supervisor Riley says

Mesa agency that provides emergency shelter to the homeless. "They are absolutely terrified of being on the streets and they have nowhere to go."

County officials and employees of local non-profit social service agencies contend the problem is compounded by a lack of government and private funding for homeless women's programs and some residents' reluctance to allow shelters for street women in their communities.

"Homeless women are like airports, dumps and trains," said Orange County Supervisor Thomas Riley, who has spearheaded an effort to open a low-cost hotel for street women. "No one wants them in their neighborhoods."

Most county shelters for the homeless accept only men, such as the Brothers of Charity in Santa Ana, or whole or partial families, such as Christian Temporary Housing in Orange.

Others, including Sheepfold in Tustin, are church-oriented and accept only those who profess to be Christians.

"Our only requirement is that they be open to the word of God and go to a church of their choice on Sunday," Sheepfold's director, Fran Lundquist, said. "Sometimes we take them ourselves in a group to church. Otherwise, we just ask them to bring us a bulletin from the

services to show they attended."

The largest of the county's two shelters for homeless women, operated by the Santa Ana YWCA, closed six weeks ago because city officials said the organization did not have a permit to operate a mission.

For more than a year, as many as 40 street women a night had slept inside cars and on carpet squares in the parking lot of the YWCA at 1411 N. Broadway.

"They were operating a mission in an area zoned for professional office buildings," said Phil Freeland, Santa Ana Planning and Development Services director.

"They started out with about four women and soon they had a pretty big operation," he said. "Neighboring business people began complaining.

"Santa Ana already has an ample number of social services," he added. "We shouldn't have to house all the poor people in Orange County. They should be spread around among all the cities."

In the wake of the closing, the Santa Ana City Council agreed to give the YWCA \$21,000 in federal money to help find temporary housing for some of the women.

Four of those women are living in a Costa Mesa apartment subsidized by the YWCA. YWCA officials said some were living together in low-cost apartments, motels and hotels throughout the county. But most, they said, have returned to the streets.

A week after the YWCA shelter closed, the county's only other shelter for homeless women closed because of electrical problems.

Dennis White, executive director of the non-profit Orange County Episcopal Service Alliance, said the social services organization had operated its Martha House shelter for 14 months in a white wooden cottage at 525 E. Washington Ave., Santa Ana.

During that time, an estimated 300 different women were given clothing, meals, shower facilities and temporary shelter in the little house that had five beds.

The alliance requested a conditional-use permit to operate another Martha House shelter for 12 women in a building at 275 S. Glassell St. in Orange, but the Planning Commission voted 3-2 to deny it June 18.

Most outspoken was Planning Commissioner Gaddi Vasquez, who said he believed the shelter

should not be in the city's downtown area.

Katharine Newman, alliance board president, disagreed, saying "a place on the outskirts couldn't be reached by street women. We need to have a place where they can get to by walking or by public transportation."

The alliance has appealed the Planning Commission decision to the City Council, which is scheduled to vote on the request Tuesday.

Today, the county Board of Supervisors is scheduled to consider granting the alliance \$125,000 in federal community block grant funds for purchase of the South Glassell Street building.

"We are hopeful there will be a positive outcome," Newman said.

UNWANTED: Task force raising funds for a low-cost, centrally located YWCA hotel in county

"We don't want to make waves.

"It's important for people to understand that we wouldn't be transporting women from Santa Ana to Orange," Newman said. "This home would be for people who are in Orange already. There people are everywhere, not just in Santa Ana."

While the alliance is fighting to open a new Martha House, Supervisor Riley is working on his proposal to open a low-cost, centrally located YWCA hotel for homeless women.

After visiting the Santa Ana YWCA shelter earlier this year, Riley formed a 27-member group known as the Task Force on Homeless Women to tackle the problem.

Members of the non-partisan committee include students, anti-poverty workers, architects, attorneys, developers and politicians.

Led by Riley's wife, Emma Jane, and Jean Aldrich, South Orange County YWCA board president, the committee established the Women's Foundation Program, a non-profit corporation, which so far has collected about \$10,000 in individual contributions.

On Thursday, the Irvine Co. agreed to guarantee a loan of up to \$20,000 toward the shelter's financing. Irvine Co. President Thomas Nelson said the company was prepared to contribute an additional \$25,000 toward the project and there would be "no conditions on the choice or development of a site."

The committee is looking at two as yet undisclosed sites for the project in central Orange County.

The next step in the program will be a major fund-raising effort patterned after the Orangewood project, in which more than \$7 million in private funds was raised for an expansion of the county's home for abused and abandoned children.

Kathleen Mooney, a task force member and a graduate student in the doctoral-clinical program at California School of Professional Psychology in Los Angeles, said she was polling county agencies to determine the services available to homeless women.

At the time of her survey several months ago, Mooney concluded there were only 18 beds in the county available exclusively for homeless women. There also is a "serious lack" of flexible and adaptable mental health services for people who do not require hospitalization but have nowhere else to go, she said.

Part of the problem is the lack of government funds available for emergency shelters, said Kevin Braaten-Moen, spokesman for the state Department of Community Development's Emergency Shelter Program.

This year, Braaten-Moen said, the state doled out \$2.5 million to 27 of the 98 agencies that applied for grants. Only one county agency, the Daple McIntosh Center in Garden Grove, received state funds through the emergency shelter program, he said. The center will use its \$40,500 grant to refurbish a building for handicapped homeless people. An October opening is scheduled.

Braaten-Moen said state legislation that would provide an addi-

tional \$5 million in emergency shelter funds and \$5 million for residential hotels next year has been approved by the Assembly and is awaiting Senate consideration.

Private funds set aside for homeless women also are limited, Orange County United Way President Merritt Johnson said.

He said 12.6 percent of the \$1.3 million available to county mem-

ber agencies this year was earmarked for programs that deal with women's problems, including homelessness, child care and battering.

"The awareness of need and the emergence of women's programs is fairly recent," he said. "And the dollars flow in accordance with community awareness.

"For example, in 1976 we began to become aware there were not

sufficient funds going to groups serving the Hispanic population given their numbers here." He said that during the past eight years, United Way has increased contributions for Hispanic programs more than ten-fold.

"Poverty and homelessness, especially the thought of a woman alone on the streets of Orange County, is still very unreal to many people here," he said.