

# Orange County Commentary

## Editorial

### County's Homeless Need Hope, Help

By JEAN FORBATH

- Great dark eyes stared out from behind his mother's chair. Waiting is hard for a 4-year-old. His mother didn't seem more than a child herself. They had been staying at her cousin's, but her cousin's husband put them out because there were too many people in the house.

- They slept in an abandoned car last night. His father is in prison and his mother's folks are in Arizona and don't want them.

- She has been supporting her family by doing housework but there is no money for first and last month's rent for a new place, and who wants to rent to five kids?

- She was 20 years old, blond, pretty and very fragile looking. She nestled her 2-week-old baby girl in her arms and hoped we could help. Her husband was with their 14-month-old son at the motel, by 11 they would be out on the street. He has been out of work for months and they would not get a welfare check for two weeks. They had no family or friends that could help them. Her terror was barely hidden beneath the surface of a wan smile.

- He was sleeping in front of our door again this morning. He was barefoot, his shoes lost somewhere on the streets. Lost as he was in a side of Orange County few ever see. Some days he's in pretty good shape. Today was not one of those days.

These are but a few typical cases among hundreds, or more likely thousands, of homeless people in Orange County. The number of homeless is impossible to calculate because they make a point of trying to be invisible, but all who deal with the problem in any way agree that the number is increasing, and a conservative estimate is 4,000 or more.

They, the homeless, sleep in cars, parks, all-night restaurants, laundromats, bus shelters and under bushes, bridges and freeway overpasses. They include young and old, single and married. Some have children. Others are alone. Many are mentally ill but are not receiving the help they desperately need. Many are working but cannot save enough money to get established in a place of their own.

It seems completely unacceptable in a society that claims to be just and compassionate that anyone should be without shelter. The problem is large and complex with no easy solutions. However, there are a few things that could help.

First, more public and private support should be given to establish more temporary shelters, places where homeless people have a chance to find work

save money and get their lives back on track. Some successful partnerships between public money and private efforts are the Orange Coast Interfaith Shelter, Christian Temporary Housing and the Martha House. Combined, however, they can shelter a maximum of only 90 people. Each still has a large mortgage and struggles constantly for operating expenses. Donations are sporadic and the few available government grants are difficult and time-consuming to obtain.

There is also a need for more shelters such as the Salvation Army's Hospitality House and the Christian Outreach Mission, where the true street people are fed and sheltered without great expectations of success stories. Success-oriented as we are, we need to realize that some people are so ill, so incapable of coping with life that they will never be able to hold a steady job. But there has to be some alternative to the street for them. Both the Mission and the Salvation

Army are so crowded that there is a limit of three nights a month, and together they can house less than 50 people.

Also needed is a revolving fund of some sort that provides no-interest or low-interest loans to help people with first and last month's rent and security deposits. So many homeless, working people are confident that they could pay back the money loaned to them to

find a place to live—if only someone would give them a loan. They, of course, have no collateral and would not score very high on TRW's credit rating scale. Granted, it would take some kind of inspired genius to set up a credit system for the homeless that would work, but the possibility needs to be looked into.

The county could help more by raising its general relief housing grant to a realistic figure that would enable a recipient to find a place to live. Few can find shelter at the present grant of \$37.50 a week. And until Orange County builds more truly low-income housing (not the \$750-a-month type), we will continue to have people evicted for back rent and thrown into the "homeless" class.

And finally, there need to be jobs for all who can work. It seems that 7% unemployment is acceptable in this country. That still means one out of every 15 people looking for work cannot find it. Stereotypes aside, a large percentage of the homeless in Orange County want to work, want their children in school and want a decent place to live.

Jean Forbath is chair of the Orange County Human Relations Commission and the founder of Share

