Press-Telegram

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JIM ROBINSON
Managing Editor

July 27, 2001

Stephanie Reighley
Children's Advocacy Institute
University of San Diego School of Law
5998 Alcala Park
San Diego, CA 92110

Dear Ms. Reighley,

Our series "Homeless Kids, Invisible Victims" may be the most disturbing subject with which I've been involved, because the problem appears to have no solution. As long as children are born to parents unwilling or unable to care for them, the terrible tragedy of lives broken early will continue.

The second installment of our series, briefly following a shiftless young woman and her four unhappy children through the streets of Long Beach and Los Angeles, is particularly heartbreaking to read. And the knowledge that their mother could produce many more children tapped a well of frustration over our apparent helplessness to intervene.

No, we did not find children sleeping in alleyways or under bridges, as we had thought we might. American has shelter for children in need, though that shelter often is only temporary. And we did find cases of hope, staffed by wonderful, caring people who offered brief calm to parents who might need a moment to find their bearings.

But our thoughts were mesmerized by the innocent victims – the children who had nothing to do with the factors that led to their parents' circumstances. We opened a window on their world, but I'm not sure we made any real difference in it.

Sincerely,

Jim Robinson
Managing Editor

Press-Telegram

SUNDAY, MARCH 11, 2001 $1 (plus tax)

SPECIAL REPORT

Homeless kids: Invisible victims

The scars can be tragic ... and permanent

Kayla Delatorre, 3, grabs a shopping cart pushed by her mother as they walk to the Long Beach Multi-Service Center for homeless aid. As many as 9,000 youngsters are estimated to lack stable housing in Los Angeles County.

itaff writer

If Kayla Delatorre were the only homeless child in America, she'd be one too many. Unfortunately, she may be one of a million. As record-breaking numbers of families find themselves without stable roofs over their heads, children are widely considered the fastest-growing segment of the country's homeless population.

In Los Angeles County alone, as many as 9,000 youngsters will go to sleep tonight unsure of where they'll be sleeping tomorrow, next week or next month, according o a recent study by the L.A.-based Shelter Partnership.

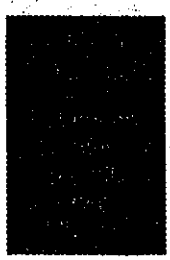
And each of these 9,000 youngsters is at great risk of leveloping permanent physical, psychological and emoional scars.

According to experts:

• Homeless kids are twice as likely as the general popılation to have chronic illnesses. They suffer twice the espiratory infections, five times the diarrheal infecions, six times the speech and stammering problems ınd seven times the iron deficiency.

• An estimated 23 percent of school-age, homeless kids are prevented from attending school regularly, which translates into a slew of educational troubles. more likely to be placed in special education programs.

• Homeless kids are more at risk than others of becoming victims of abuse or neglect as their parents struggle to cope with the stress of poverty.



• Homeless kids, faced with a continuous lack of security and stability, suffer a range of emotional problems, such as anger, fear, frustration, shame, depression and distrust.

• Without the proper guidance and instruction, homeless children are highly at risk of becoming homeless adults.

Where does one find these victims of vagrancy — too innocent to be outcast and too young to be doomed?

Often invisible to those who aren't looking, transient kids are living in shelters and cars, sleeping on other people's couches or watching their parents exchange county vouchers for a night in a seedy motel room.

Some are scared. Others are angry. Most are confused.

And all homeless children — save for runaway teenagers — are in situations beyond their control, forced to

PLEASE SEE **HOMELESS / A10**

HOMELESS KIDS

INVISIBLE VICTIMS

THE SERIES

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• **Monday:** The sad tale of one family's unraveling.
• **Tuesday:** The Play House, a preschool for homeless kids.
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• **Sunday:** What's being done to help homeless children

"(Last year) we saw more homeless families than I've seen in 12 years operating this program. I anticipate this year it's going to be greater."

Brenda Wilson, New Image Emergency Shelter for the Homeless

HOMELESS: Their numbers, like their fates, are uncertain

CONTINUED FROM A1

navigate the complicated problems of their homeless parents, usually single moms.

It's uncertain how many homeless children reside in America; estimates widely differ. But the National Coalition for the Homeless puts the number as high as 1.2 million on any given night. And a 1998 survey by the U.S. Conference of Mayors found that children account for 25 percent of the urban homeless population.

Specifics for individual cities are elusive as well, shifting as quickly as the time it takes to step onto a Blue Line train. But a local nonprofit organization called Children Today puts the number of Long Beach's transient families at 575, each with an average of three to four kids.

They come to homelessness by many routes, none of them pleasant. In Long Beach:

• Mark James, 9, stood by helplessly as landlords evicted his mother for not paying the rent, sending the family scrambling to a homeless shelter.

•Sandra, whose real name is being protected, was in grade school when she was awakened by her mother to escape the angry hands of an abusive father. While leaving meant suffering the effects of poverty, it was well worth it, says Sandra, now an 18-year-old college student.

•Kayla Delatorre, 3, and her siblings were forced to travel the streets of Long Beach with two trash bags full of possessions and a shopping cart after her mom made an ill-fated attempt to reunite the family with her former husband.

•And 1-year-old Christian Cordova was born into homelessness. His mother, at the time unemployed and drug-addicted, checked herself into a substance-abuse program for expecting mothers.

Homeless by choice

In addition to these "accompanied youth," an unknown number of teen-agers choose to leave their homes for the uncertainty of the streets. Constituting roughly 3 percent of the country's homeless population, runaways hang out at parks, beaches, arcades and restaurants, hiding from truancy officers by day and squatting in abandoned buildings by night.

If they can manage it, they sleep at friends' homes, a phenomenon with the strangely fun-sounding name "sofa surfing."

Coping with this array of transients is a loosely knit network of social services, including private shelters, food banks and government subsidies.

Area shelters that take families with children usually limit stays to 30 or 45 days, although more are providing case managers who help individuals and families move into transitional or permanent housing.

And most homeless families supplement shelter handouts with welfare checks, food stamps and hotel voucher systems.

Unfortunately, it seems the demand for such services is only growing.

Shavella Cage proudly displays a piece of homemade clay for Anita Velasquez, who directs the Play House, Long Beach's only preschool for homeless kids. Opened last year and earning rave reviews, the Play House allows children a chance to learn and grow in a stress-free environment while their parents search for housing, transportation or employment.

Last winter, the area's only cold-weather emergency shelter gave hotel, motel and meal vouchers to 83 families with 321 children, says Brenda Wilson, co-founder and executive director of New Image Emergency Shelter for the Homeless, in Harbor City. The previous winter, it was only 24 families.

"We saw more homeless families than I've seen in 12 years operating this program," Wilson says. "I anticipate this year it's going to be greater."

Wilson says families in need are multiplying partly because of welfare cuts and partly because of a shortage of low-income housing. More than half the parents seen at the shelter last winter came with at least five children.

In such situations, the children's fate depends entirely on the choices of the adults in their lives. All too often, their trust in those adults crumbles.

At young ages, homeless kids begin to worry about their families' finances. They know the exact amount of their parents' hourly wages, the cost of a low-rent apartment and how much money they need to save to get into one.

They dream not of fancy toys or trips to Disneyland but of the comfort of two armchairs and some shag carpeting.

Stress and illness

Homeless children who are alone and living on the streets are in danger of being exploited. But even those under supervision are at risk.

The high stress level makes kids especially susceptible to illness, says Tracy Cunningham of Children Today. Sometimes their only source of nutrition is the school cafeteria.

"Homeless children," she says, "have twice as many health problems even as the very poor."

"There's No Place Like Home: How America's Housing Crisis Threatens Our Children," a study released in March 1999 by Housing America, showed a correlation between the number of children lacking safe, low-cost housing and the number suffering from asthma, viral infections, anemia, stunted growth and other health problems.

Benjamin Richmond, 2, hides behind the box lid from a toy at Catholic Charities' emergency shelter in Long Beach. On this day, Benjamin and his parents are entering their second week at the shelter and their third week without a home of their own. Catholic Charities is among several local homeless shelters that accept children, but stays are generally limited to 30 days.

Emotional issues run the gamut. Half the time homeless children must act with the maturity of an adult, keeping their mouths shut because they don't want to make life any tougher for their parents.

The rest of the time, they're acting out — because life is tough for them, too, and they're tired of keeping their mouths shut.

Short of abuse and neglect, homeless kids almost always stay in their parents' custody. Even some of the most destitute situations fall outside the jurisdiction of the sprawling Los Angeles County Department of Children & Family Services, says Armond Montiel, the department's chief of staff.

"We don't detain for poverty reasons," he says, but adds, "At some point, a line is drawn when a parent cannot care for the child."Generally, neglect means a negligent failure to provide adequate clothing, shelter, medical care or supervis a child. That definition leaves room for s tivity on the part of social workers, who ate each case on its own merits.

Dorris Lopez-Manson, who supervises dren Services' social workers, says drawi line between poverty and neglect can b plicated.

The federal government defines a ho child as any child or youth without a fixe ular and adequate nighttime residence.

A child living out of a car, she ex wouldn't necessarily signal neglect. But left unattended in a car would.

Missed school

One of the most tragic consequen homeless children is that their educatio gets shoved to the bottom of the family priorities. Homeless kids are in dar falling far behind in school, according t York-based organization called Homes Homeless.

It's no wonder.

Kids who are moving constantly are kept enrolled in one school. When th they face a host of other problems, such of transportation and difficulty with work.

And parents aren't focused on scho they're worried about food or shelter.

"While every parent cares very muc their children, they're concentrated o survival issues," Cunningham says.

Meanwhile, the child's future is at s

A lack of education, many experts sa beginning of a vicious cycle. Poverty-s kids who don't go to school are much m ly to become poverty-stricken parents.

Luckily, in Long Beach, there are a number of resources specifically for h children — including a preschool, school and an emergency shelter for y

MONDAY: Life on the streets

Press-Telegram

MONDAY, MARCH 12, 2001

Homeless and helpless

Life on the streets

Homeless and single, Rose Delatorre lugs a trash bag full of clothes from a Blue Line station to the Union Rescue Mission in downtown Los Angeles. Her children, from front to back, are Kayla Delatorre, Christian Delatorre, Timothy Stiles and Melissa Brown.

Their days are filled with uncertainties

By Ralph De La Cruz
Staff writer

Second in a series

Photos by Brittany M. Solo, Press-Telegram

Smoky, bulbous storm clouds were rolling in behind her, but Rose Delatorre didn't so much as look up.

She kept walking, bent forward, pushing a shopping cart holding her 3-year-old daughter, Kayla.

Rose was too late picking up her kids at the bus stop. Too tired to worry about the weather.

That's the way Rose's life had become of late: always too late, too tired.

So she just concentrated on the next patch of concrete in front of her next, too-late, too-tired step.

The shopping cart Rose was pushing was the one constant in an otherwise chaotic, unpredictable life.

At 28, Rose has had four children with three men. On the day she graduated from her high school in Concord, she was eight months pregnant with her first child, Melissa. She does not have any post-high school education.

In 1993, Rose married a construction laborer who became the father of her two youngest children. They divorced two years ago.

From then on, Rose has struggled to stay afloat and out of homelessness. After the divorce, she and the children lived primarily in the Concord area. For

PLEASE SEE HOMELESS / A6

Kayla Delatorre, 3, sits on top of her family's possessions during a ride on the Blue Line from Long Beach to Los Angeles. She has spent many nights at shelters, with relatives and in cheap motels.

HOMELESS KIDS
INVISIBLE VICTIMS

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Kayla Delatorre sullenly plays with a toy — one of only a few she has — in the doorway of a motel room. On this day, her mother has run out of money to pay for the room, putting the family on the streets once again.

"It's kind of scary. When we had an apartment, we used to see a lot of people living out on the streets. And now, maybe we're going to be like that."

Melissa Brown, 10

HOMELESS: A world of vouchers, aid checks and shelters

Timothy Stiles, 7, takes in a living-room scene at a downtown Los Angeles fabric store. Most kids might stop to gaze into a toy store or pet shop. But to Timothy, who is making his way to a homeless shelter with his family, this window is a dream world.

CONTINUED FROM **A1**

10 months, Rose worked as a telephone solicitor, and they lived in an apartment partially subsidized by the county.

But, Rose explained, her younger son, Christian, became ill and was hospitalized. She quit her job to stay with him. That was a problem because the apartment subsidy was contingent on her staying employed or going to school. So, the rent went up.

And Rose and the kids moved in with her parents.

That's where they were New Year's Eve when Rose told Kayla, Chris, 5, Tim, 7, and Melissa, 10, to pack up their stuff. By 10:30 p.m., they were on a Greyhound bus in Oakland. The bus arrived in Long Beach at 6:15 a.m. New Year's Day.

"I want my kids to get closer to their father," was Rose's explanation for the sudden decision. She said she reached her conclusion during a Christmas phone call with her ex-husband.

Besides, she added, the cost of living in Long Beach is much lower than in the Bay area. The check cashing place in Concord took $27 out of the $849 monthly aid check she received from Contra Costa County. She has lived in Long Beach for short periods twice before.

"Here, they only take out $18," Rose said.

Try for help

Rose didn't mention it, but there was an implied, almost obvious, expectation: her former husband would provide the financial and emotional support she needed.

But after they got here, there was no big help from her ex-husband, who was living in a studio apartment in central Long Beach.

Rose and the kids were slowly using up their aid options: a two-week stay at a family shelter, vouchers for one-night stays at cheap motels.

On the day I first met Rose and the kids, they were staying at the Palm Motel at Pacific Avenue and Pacific Coast Highway in Long Beach. She and Kayla were lying in bed under the covers, watching an early afternoon sitcom on a television bolted to the ceiling. Clothes, a few toys, school papers and food wrappers littered the room. Rose and the four children had been living there for a week.

The $192 Rose had paid for a week's stay had basically wiped out the last of the $300 to $400 she'd brought with her from Concord. The next night, she and the kids would be without money or a place to stay.

And, she confided, as if things weren't bad enough, a physical at a free clinic had revealed a walnut-size lump in her breast.

Rose began to cry.

"I'm sick, and I have to worry about where we're going to sleep and what we're going to eat," she said, tears streaming down her face.

Off to the side, Kayla stared wide-eyed and silent.

Effect on kids

Rose knew that the homelessness was affecting the children.

"I try to keep my spirits up for my kids," she said. "If they know I'm upset, then they know things are really bad.

"My 7-year-old (Tim) has become real emotional," Rose continued. "He used to be whiny. But now, he's worse.

"At least they're in school and not roaming the streets."

The school, Mary McLeod Bethune School in Long Beach, is specifically for homeless children.

With three of her children in school from 8 a.m. to 3:40 p.m., Rose was able to conduct her business. These days, that entailed making sure they had a place to sleep at night.

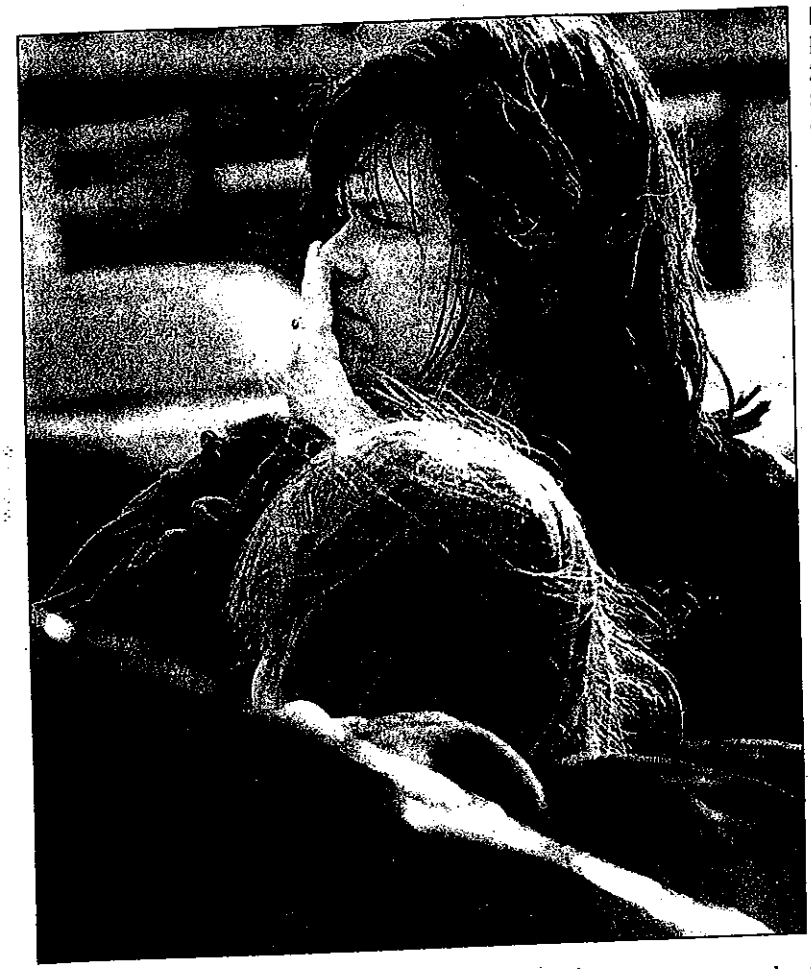
It meant loading Kayla and their possessions into the shopping cart, finding a phone and calling agencies. Or walking to the Multi-Service Center, a one-stop center for homeless people on the west side of Long Beach that tries to connect homeless people with shelter, jobs and job training.

It was at the Multi-Service Center that Rose was given an emergency voucher that let her rent a motel for another night. But, she was warned, it would be the last one.

Compared with such daily uncertainties, the Bethune School is sanctuary in a turbulent world. It is structured, stable. The kids are fed a good breakfast and lunch. There are games and books. A playground.

And, most importantly, there are other children there who know what an AFDC (Aid for Families with Dependent Children) check is, and what the inside of the Palm Motel smells like.

In school, Melissa, Tim and Chris were polite and enthusiastic. Occasionally, Tim acted out.



Rose Delatorre, 28, takes a minute to contemplate her next move. After using up all her options for temporary housing in Long Beach, Delatorre's choices are limited. In a moment, she will load her four kids onto a Blue Line train and head for the Union Rescue Mission in downtown Los Angeles.

But nothing so extreme that you would think of him as a problem child.

Friendly chat

When I sat down to speak with the three of them, they were respectful and friendly, almost glib — particularly Melissa.

"When we were on the Greyhound bus coming out here," Tim began the story of their strange New Year's Eve.

"Timmy was asleep, and all of the sudden we were counting down," Melissa interrupted with a laugh.

I asked, That's how you celebrated New Year's Eve?

"It was 2 in the morning, and we stopped at a Burger King," Tim said.

"In the middle of nowhere," Melissa interjected.

"And they gave us a sheet of Pokemon cards," Tim finished.

Tim talked about missing the 7-year-old Pekingese dog, "Baby," at his grandparents' house, and Chris spoke about missing his grandparents.

Melissa explained how her younger siblings call her Sissy, and how Tim is very annoying and Kayla is annoying and Chris is OK.

I asked about being homeless. Is it exciting or scary, fun or hard?

"It's really hard," Melissa answered somberly, then paused.

"It's not fun or exciting," she added. "Just hard. It actually is scary. We might not be able to go to a hotel tonight."

Later that day, I saw Rose at the bus stop where she picked up her kids, the one place I knew I could find her. She was walking with a woman. A friend of her ex-husband's, Rose explained.

I introduced myself. The woman did not appear too happy with my presence and did not offer her name.

It was a Friday, and Rose, pushing the shopping cart, said that she'd been unable to locate shelter. She didn't know where they would stay that night or where they would eat.

Her new companion said she wouldn't let the kids go hungry. Rose and the kids ended up staying at the woman's house over the weekend.

When I saw Rose at the bus stop Monday, she was angry. Her companion, Rose explained, was apparently her ex-husband's girlfriend. Continuing to stay with her was out of the question. Besides, she added, the woman was moving and had to vacate the apartment by the next day.

Even worse, Rose continued, the aid check from Contra Costa County that she had been eagerly awaiting had finally arrived at the Multi-Service Center, but the envelope had been opened and there was no check.

Patrick Burkhardt, the city's Homeless Services coordinator and the man temporarily running the Multi-Service Center, had told her he could not be certain whether the envelope had ever contained a check or whether it had been tampered with at the center.

Another check would have to be cut by Contra Costa County, meaning no relief for the foreseeable future.

Different mood

Rose leaned hard against the shopping cart as she told her story. Kayla was in the child seat. The three other children, who had been waiting for their mother, walked up to the cart.

They seemed much angrier and less cooperative than before.

Tim, who had been kicking the side of the bus shelter and a liquor store wall, stopped to open a plastic bag with a couple of old biscuits. He had difficulty opening a small plastic tub of jelly and asked Rose for help.

Chris teased Kayla, who, tired from sitting in the cart while her mother walked around town, tried to get out.

Rose was trying to explain her situation to me, keep Kayla in the cart, and open up the plastic tub of jelly.

Suddenly, Tim said they'd been given a coupon for a free pizza at school.

Rose stopped.

Stopped talking, stopped dealing with Kayla.

PLEASE SEE **HOMELESS / A**

"Hopefully, we'll get past this soon."

Rose Delatorre

Timothy Stiles, 7, eats a biscuit that he saved from his free lunch at Mary McLeod Bethune School for homeless children in Long Beach. At this point in his life, Timothy wouldn't dream of wasting food.

HOMELESS: A child's worst fear living on the street

stopped opening up the little tub of jelly.

"Where is it?" she asked.

It's in Melissa's backpack, the kids said.

Rose began digging through the backpack and found a little workbook produced by Buono's Pizza, with some buy-one-get-something coupons.

"Why'd you tell me that you had free food?" Rose snapped at Melissa, who was standing quietly away from everybody, holding her hands.

"The teachers said there was," Melissa answered.

"Well, there's no free food here," Rose said, angrily throwing the book into the cart.

Cry for a biscuit

Chris promptly renewed his pleas for a biscuit. Rose tried to pry the biscuit open with a plastic fork and it crumbled in her hand.

Kayla was still trying to get out, now saying loudly, "I want out." Chris was demanding his biscuit.

"It broke," Rose told him. "Forget it, we have to go."

"But I'm hungry," Chris complained.

"I don't need this now," Rose answered.

Then, she began sobbing.

"Let's go," she said, jamming Kayla back into the cart. "We've got to get to your grandma's apartment to use the phone before all the shelters close."

They trudged off, tears running down Rose's cheeks, Kayla and Chris crying, Tim kicking at signs. Melissa, sullen and with her head down, shuffled along, three feet behind the rest of the family.

The next day at school, the three appeared more tense than usual. They had managed to stay one more night at the woman's home. But today was moving day for the woman, and staying there was no longer a possibility.

Melissa and I sat down to play a counting game and to talk about all the changes in their lives. I asked if she felt pressure as the oldest.

Being the eldest

"Sometimes the younger ones like to tag along with big sis, and they bug me," Melissa said. "I don't like being the oldest. It kind of bugs me a lot."

There was a pause, and a few moves of the beads we were playing with.

"My mom said it may be our last day at the school," Melissa continued. "We might have to go to the (Los Angeles) Rescue Mission. If it's not our last day, we might go back to the Bay area. I'm all right with that."

Pause. Play.

"I'm not worried, but my mom is," she continued.

I asked Melissa, "Do you worry about your mom when she's worried?"

"Yeah," she answered. "Sometimes it's obvious (when she's worried), sometimes it isn't. Sometimes I try to comfort her. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't."

Pause. Play.

"I just want mom to be on time to pick us up at the bus shelter, and for us to have someplace to stay other than my dad's friend's. I know that after the second day we were there, they were annoyed."

Pause. Play.

"Sometimes, people like to make fun of us. The other day, these girls said, when they saw my mom pushing the shopping cart, 'That looks so ghetto.' It's kind of sad for me to hear that."

Pause. Play.

"It's kind of scary. When we had an apartment, we used to see a lot of people living out on the streets. And now, maybe we're going to be like that."

Fear of the streets

I asked Melissa if she really believed they would end up spending nights on the streets.

"I truly do," she answered.

That afternoon, when Rose picked up the kids at the bus stop, she was visibly angry and frightened.

"You just missed (him)," Rose said to me, referring to her husband. I was highly disappointed at the near-miss. Saying that he

Christian Delatorre, 5, reads a book on George Washington at Bethune School. There, he is promised a safe place to learn, lots of smiling faces and at least two meals — things sometimes absent from the rest of his life.

was very upset that she was speaking with a newspaperman, Rose had kept his whereabouts a well-guarded secret.

She said her ex-husband was talking of taking custody of Chris. Only Chris. Not Melissa, not Tim. Not even Kayla, his other biological child.

All of the kids were listening, faces scrunched up.

Rose explained that the only shelter she'd been able to find was the L.A. Rescue Mission in downtown L.A. She didn't want to go there. It was far from Long Beach and her ex-husband — the reason she had come south.

On top of that, the space was available only if she could get there before 5 p.m. But it was her only option.

It was 3:40 p.m. and she was standing at Pacific Avenue and Pacific Coast Highway in Long Beach with four children, two huge trash bags crammed with belongings, and her shopping cart. No car.

Worse, Rose added, she'd slipped on some steps earlier in the day at Christian Outreach Appeal and wrenched her back.

Blue Line ride

We headed to the nearest Blue Line station, Rose and the kids, photographer Brittany Solo and I.

The dark green plastic bags were particularly heavy today because the Bethune School, knowing it was the children's last day, had given them toys, books, clothes and food.

As we prepared to cross the street to the station, Rose matter-of-factly mentioned that they don't allow shopping carts on Blue Line trains.

Marcus pulled the bags out of the cart, and at 3:57 p.m., Rose left the trusty cart, now rusting in several joints, at the southwest corner of Long Beach Boulevard and PCH.

The train ride was pleasant. A woman helped Melissa find a seat, then engaged her in conversation. Rose soaked in each kind word or act. Soon, she was smiling.

But, alarmingly — at least to me — she didn't seem to sense

Finally, unable to contain myself, I asked her for the Rescue Mission's address. Putting aside my role of observer, I walked over to the route map and suggested a station that seemed to be close to that address.

It was an action I would soon regret.

The walk begins

We disembarked at 4:45, and as soon as we began walking, it became obvious I had made a mistake.

We were 17 blocks from the Rescue Mission.

Rose sat down on the sidewalk and began crying.

Tossing aside any final thoughts of maintaining journalistic distance, I grabbed the heavier of the two bags — it must have weighed 50 or 60 pounds — and told Rose, "Let's move, or you'll never make it."

Rose, complaining of the pain in her back, quickly fell behind.

When the photographer and I got two blocks ahead, I'd put down the bag — stretched and full of holes where heavy items had broken through — and waited for Rose and the kids.

A third of the way to the shelter, Rose caught up and hurled a venomous tirade at us.

"You just keep taking my picture," she yelled at the photographer. "You people think this is funny, huh?"

Sweaty, tired, frustrated and anxious, I thought, this must be how her parents and other people who tried to help Rose felt. I wanted to tell her off, leave the bag on the ground and head home.

But I realized I was experiencing only a fraction of what Rose was going through each day.

Every day, her muscles hurt. Every day, she didn't know whether she'd make it to shelter. Every day she survived with only the promise of the same struggle tomorrow.

Unsmiling, we said nothing. I picked up the bag and moved on.

Trek continues

After that, we stayed well ahead of Rose who, by this time, was demanding that Tim and Melissa help carry her bag.

As we continued through the garment district toward Skid Row, the bag shredded and deformed, I talked a reluctant merchant into letting us borrow a large cart. One of its wheels was hobbled, cut in a half-moon shape, presumably so it would be harder to push and less worth stealing.

We put both the bags onto it, Chris and Kayla eventually also hopped on, and we pressed on to the Rescue Mission.

It was 6:15 p.m. and dusk was spreading over Skid Row as we arrived at the Mission. The old men who occupy the city of plastic and cardboard were returning to the lean-tos and tents that line Skid Row's sidewalks.

Melissa stared in fear.

But Rose and the kids had just made it. Mission workers were just closing the doors for dinner, and the family was let in.

We were not.

I gave Rose my business card and walked back to return the hobbled cart.

We didn't hear from Rose again. Neither did Bethune School.

As with her ex-husband, Rose had gone out of her way to keep her parents' identity and phone number private. But I had to know what happened to her and, more to the point, the four kids.

Final contact

More than a month later, using an address in Concord that Rose had given us, I obtained her parents' names and telephone number. After several tries, someone answered the phone. It was Rose's mother.

When I identified myself, she turned the phone over to her daughter without saying a word.

Rose and the kids were OK.

I thought back to something Rose had said in closing that first day at the Palm Motel.

"Hopefully, we'll get past this soon," she said. "I hope someday I can be sitting on a couch, saying, 'Remember that time I slept out in the Dumpster?' "

Tuesday: A preschool for homeless children.

Press-Telegram

TUESDAY, MARCH 13, 2001

SPECIAL REPORT

A haven for homeless kids

Play House offers meals, naps, social skills and caring

Smiles abound in the sunshine outside The Play House, a free-of-charge preschool run out of the Long Beach Multi-Service Center. The preschool was opened last year for homeless children.

Photo provided by Children Today

By Wendy Thomas Russell
Staff writer

Third in a series

Photos by Brittany M. Solo Press-Telegram

"A hundred years from now, it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove. But the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child."

The adage has been circulated countless times in many forms over the years. But somehow it seems especially poignant hanging inside a 7-month-old preschool for homeless children.

The Play House, open weekdays between 7:30 a.m. and 5:30 p.m., is run by Children Today at the Long Beach Multi-Service Center, an outpost for the homeless on the city's west side.

The preschool accommodates 22 children: eight infants up to age 2 and 14 youngsters from 2 to 5. It's first come, first served, so when the slots are

PLEASE SEE HOMELESS / A8

Ajani Assid rubs soap on his face during morning playtime at The Play House. The staff there encourages "sensory activities" such as water games, shaving-cream art and finger paints.

THE SERIES

HOMELESS KIDS
INVISIBLE VICTIMS

- **Sunday:** About a quarter of homeless people are children.
- **Monday:** The sad tale of one family's unraveling.
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ıntwonae Hampton, 3, gets some extra attention from Play House)irector Anita Velasquez.

"Our goal is to have the Long Beach business community really embrace these children."

Jennifer Fitzgerald, co-founder, Children Today

Head Teacher Stacey VanOrsdell rests her face on her fist as youngsters at The Play House enjoy an afternoon snack of grapes and crackers. Without the preschool, many homeless kids "would be hanging out in the shelters (or) ... waiting in lines at the welfare office," says Director Anita Velasquez.

HOMELESS: Books, toys and lots of games

CONTINUED FROM **A1**

filled for the day, children are turned away. But those who get in are promised a day full of new experiences, long nap times and three meals.

For single parents with no jobs, no money and no homes of their own, The Play House is a dream come true.

"I love it," pronounces Irene Cordova, a divorced mother who says she was driven to homelessness by alcohol and drugs. "I'm at ease."

Drug treatment

Cordova, 41, says she checked herself into a Long Beach drug-treatment center for expecting mothers called Baby Steps Inn about a year ago. Now, she says she's clean and sober and getting her life in order.

Teacher Kassie Lem blows bubbles for Antwonae Hampton, who has learned valuable social skills at The Play House.

The Play House, which cares for her sons, Christian, 1, and Anthony, 3, has a big role in that, she says. She can do her laundry, attend alcohol-treatment meetings and go to school for job training without worrying about her kids.

"I know I have to stay clean for (my children)," Cordova adds. "I knew it then, but I just didn't have the tools."

Play House Director Anita Velasquez says the preschool is exactly that: a tool. Caring for small children during the day, she says, can limit — and sometimes destroy — a homeless parent's ability to get back on track.

Likewise, a child's ability to develop language and social skills can be hindered, she says, when a parent is consumed with things such as finding shelter for the night.

On this day, Velasquez scans the brightly painted Play House, her gaze settling on two little boys with their hands dipped in pink clay. If they weren't here, the boys might be learning little more than how to stand in line for government benefits or how to walk the streets.

Toddlers DJ Clemmons Wicker, left, and Jade Newell are two of the homeless children who have benefited from The Play House since its opening last summer.

"Some of (the kids) would be strapped in a stroller and toted around," Velasquez says. "Some of them would be hanging out in the shelters (or) running everywhere with the parents — waiting in lines at the welfare office or wherever.

"It's great that they can come here."

Books and toys

The walls are cheerfully painted — sky blue with fluffy clouds on the toddlers' side, zoo animals on the other. Books, toys and art supplies are everywhere.

Two dozen little feet traipse from one activity to the next. They climb on an indoor, wooden jungle gym, use glitter paint to decorate almost anything and mold miniature birthday cakes out of homemade clay.

At first glance, The Play House resembles any run-of-the-mill preschool. But a closer inspection shows subtle differences.

- A stockpile of extra clothing in a back room is dispersed to children who need it.
- — are afforded to children assumed to need more rest than most preschoolers.
- Special focus is placed on "sensory" activities — water games, shaving-cream art and finger paints, to name a few.

"In this place," Velasquez says, "we are much more concerned with providing them opportunities that they wouldn't otherwise have."

The Play House is run by Children Today, a local nonprofit partially funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development on an annual budget of about $275,000, says Tracy Cunningham, the group's executive director.

Jennifer Fitzgerald and Theresa Bixby, two local moms on a mission to help children in need, founded Children Today.

Fitzgerald, 34, had been operating a child-care center out of the World Trade Center when she switched gears.

It goes back to one day a few years ago, Fitzgerald says, when she was driving in Long Beach and saw "a little baby running down the street." It was dusk. Fitzgerald hastily looked around for a parent, but there was none to be seen.

HOMELESS: A chance for kids to just be kids

CONTINUED FROM **A8**

"The image," she says, "wouldn't go away."

Fitzgerald got Bixby to come onboard, and the two developed the idea over a few years. They even used their 1999 Leadership Long Beach class to produce a video about homeless children.

Children Today, which plans to fund other projects like the Play House as funds become available, hopes to supplement grants with donations from local businesses.

"Our goal is to have the Long Beach business community really embrace these children," Fitzgerald says.

Life outside

At the Play House, it's important to let kids be kids, Velasquez says. Especially when, just outside the front door, even the littlest children are often expected to act mature.

"I see them being yelled at for just being a kid: for being curious, for asking questions," Velasquez says.

According to a recent public policy report by the Better Homes Fund, one-fifth of all homeless kids ages 3 to 6 are extremely distressed and have emotional problems severe enough to require professional care.

Twelve percent suffer from chronic problems such as anxiety, depression and withdrawal, the report says. Sixteen percent exhibit behavior problems, such as severe aggression and hostility, it says.

How you can help

- If you want to help the Play House, call (562) 985-[illegible] ext. 16[illegible]
- To make donations or provide other assistance to other local homeless organizations through the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services, call Patrick Burkhardt at (562) 570-4003 or Angela Corona at (562) 570-4001.

Working against harsh realities can also make homeless children a little different to handle. They act out more often, says head teacher Stacey VanOrsdell, and they don't know how to control their anger.

Lack of trust is another noticeable problem among the youngsters, VanOrsdell says.

When 3-year-old Antwonae Hampton stepped inside The Play House for the first time, she seemed to lack the social skills of most children her age.

"She wouldn't talk," Velasquez says. "She would grunt, and she would point at you."

Now, Hampton is clearly more secure.

Wearing a purple jumper dress, with marker streaks on her cheeks and hands, she climbs into Velasquez's lap, smiles shyly and gently nuzzles her head between Velasquez's shoulder and neck.

"Now, you can see she's more comfortable here," Velasquez says.

Theresa Bixby, left, and Jennifer Fitzgerald started Children Today, which runs The Pl House. Both are moms who wanted to do more for local homeless kids.

WEDNESDAY: *A grade school for homeless kids.*

They bring tutors to kids without homes

Cheri Beckersle tutors Jasmine Vera, 7, as part of School on Wheels, a tutoring program for homeless children. Tutors meet with kids once a week for an hour.

By Wendy Thomas Russell
Staff writer

When Agnes Stevens learned how hard it is for homeless children to get to school, she decided to take her school to homeless children.

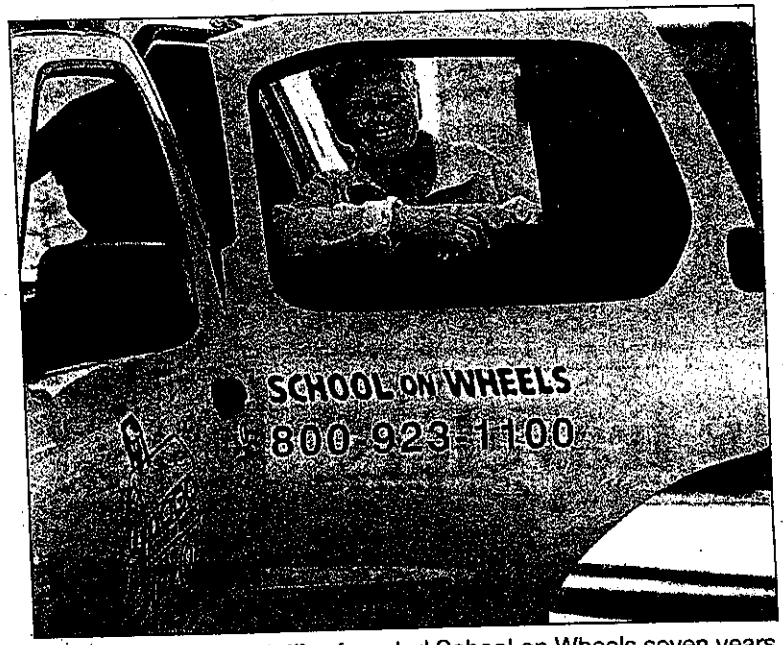
Seven years ago, Stevens began School on Wheels, a Malibu-based tutoring program that sends volunteers from all over Los Angeles County into shelters, motels and even cars — anywhere homeless kids are known to be staying.

Now, says the 65-year-old former schoolteacher, the program has "a life of its own."

"There's almost an instant attitude change by the kid when they meet their tutor," Stevens says.

For one hour, once a week, the kids get a teacher all to themselves to help with homework or tackle a thorny subject.

"The idea is to keep the child focused on their education," says Ann Casady, a Lakewood resident and regional coordinator for the program. "Education is the most important thing."



Agnes Stevens of Malibu founded School on Wheels seven years ago to bring private tutors to homeless kids around Los Angeles County. The tutors meet kids in shelters, motels, parks and libraries, among other places.

School on Wheels has grown from one volunteer to more than 750. Sadly, that's not nearly enough, Stevens says.

Sometimes kids are tutored for only a week, sometimes a month, sometimes a year. It depends on how long they are homeless. Most of the kids go to school already since many shelters require it.

Casady remembers being surprised that so many homeless children were highly intelligent and eager to learn.

"Being homeless has basica no correlation to intelligence, she says. "Most of these homeless kids are very bright, very resourceful."

If tutors can't find a place to teach in a shelter or motel roor they'll find a public place nearl usually a library.

At one shelter, without teach ing space, benches are set up i the parking lot and TV trays a used as writing surfaces weath er permitting.

Casady has seen kids homeless for many reasons. But the saddest are those who never h a chance.

Those are the kids who nee School on Wheels the most, sl says.

"There are some of these fa lies that have been homeless years. We've met (people) wh parents and grandparents ha grown up in homeless shelte and who have never known a other life."

Anyone interested in volunteering for School on Wheels may call (562 867-5158.

Press-Telegram

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 14, 2001

SPECIAL REPORT

Educating homeless kids

A school of their own

Carlos Mololey, 10, works on a Mayflower project at Mary McLeod Bethune School. In the last decade, hundreds of kids have temporarily attended Bethune while their parents searched for housing.

L.B. haven offers learning, belonging

By Wendy Thomas Russell
Staff writer

It's silent-reading time at Mary McLeod Bethune School, but Carlos Mololey isn't reading.

Instead, the stocky 10-year-old skips to the center of the classroom, turns and takes a running leap onto a big, blue beanbag.

He lies there, sprawled out and grinning proudly.

Fourth in a series

Photos by Brittany M. Solo / Press-Telegram

In other schools, Carlos' rambunctiousness might be reprimanded. But here, in this West Long Beach school designated for homeless children, the diversion barely registers a blip on the radar screen of teacher Brian Dilts.

As far as Dilts is concerned, Carlos has earned the privilege of a little tomfoolery and so have the 10 other homeless kids attending Bethune on this chilly November day.

After all, when they walk out of school, reality will take hold: They will once again be the kids without homes. Without security. Without certainty.

In their everyday lives, many have dirty hair and empty stomachs. They don't take

PLEASE SEE HOMELESS / A8

Bethune student Mark James, 9, says he's optimistic that his family will "get settled" soon and move out of the homeless shelter where they've been living.

HOMELESS KIDS
INVISIBLE VICTIMS

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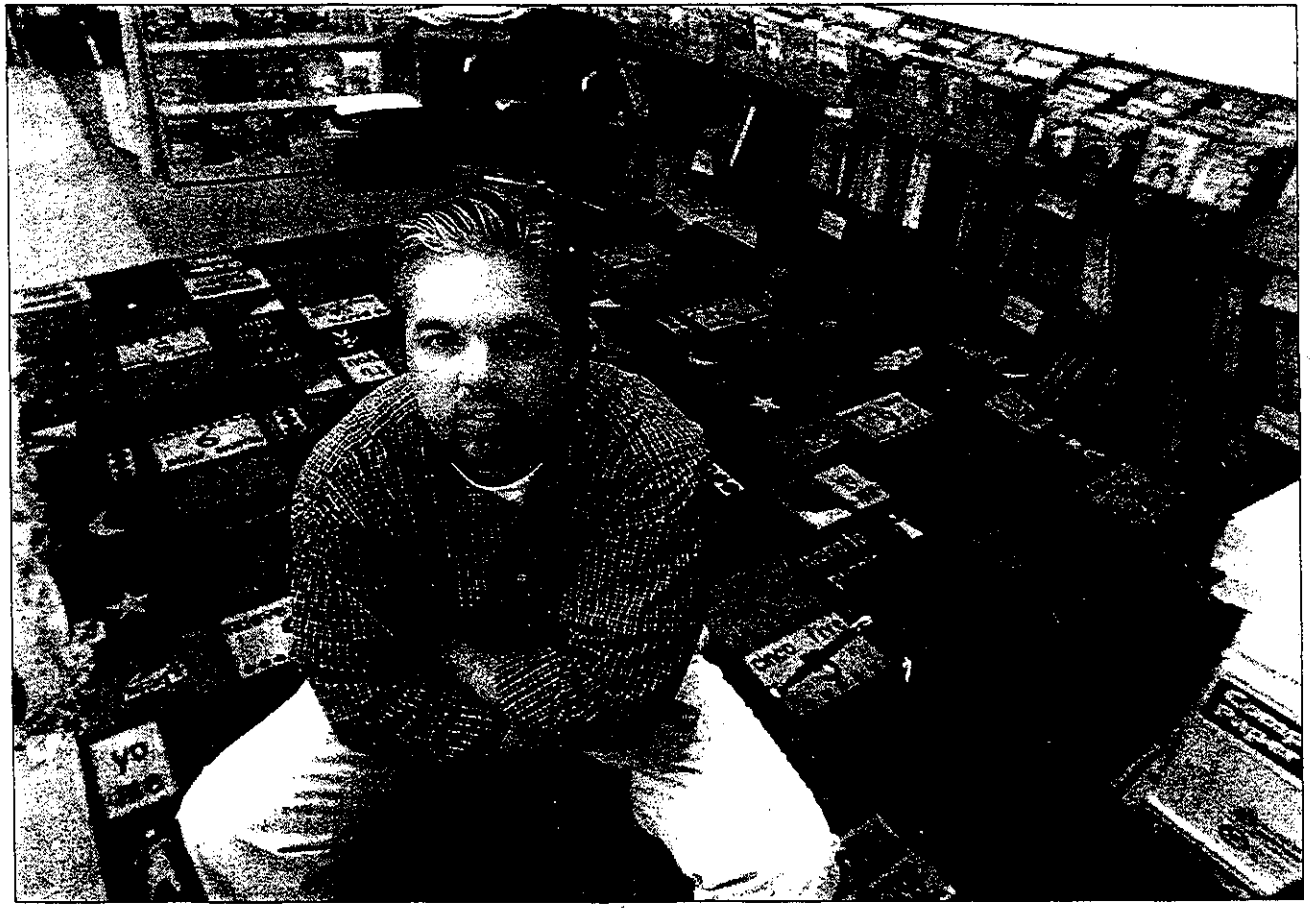
"(Bethune is) a pretty good deal. You know (the kids) are going to get clothed, fed, cared for and educated."

Brian Dilts, Bethune teacher

HOMELESS: Bringing continuity to children's lives



As Bethune's only teacher, Brian Dilts makes every effort to make each child feel included and respected. "I don't care if you haven't had a bath in five days and if you have lice — you're going to get as much respect as I do," he says.

CONTINUED FROM **A1**

trips to toy stores, theme parks or pizza parlors. Their play times are brief and often overshadowed by the worries of the day and the fragility of their lives.

"They've witnessed abuse," Dilts, 31, says of many of his pupils. "They've been abused. They're in constant transition. They don't know where they'll be sleeping tonight."

At Bethune, Dilts says, they "get to be kids again, instead of carrying this weight."

If Carlos is playing, it means he's in a place that makes him feel comfortable, safe and happy.

Quality questions

That's much of what Bethune — one of about 40 schools for the homeless nationwide — is about. Its mission has raised the eyebrows of more than a few state and federal agencies, whose administrators say quality of education is sacrificed when homeless pupils are segregated from other pupils.

The federal Stuart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 excludes schools such as Bethune from applying for the federal money to which most schools are entitled. And California's Department of Education supports the act.

"Many times when we isolate students, they don't receive the full benefit of public education," says Doug McDougall, who controls McKinney funds for the department. "The law doesn't say that we should separate someone because their feelings will get hurt."

Superintendent Carl Cohn of the Long Beach Unified School District dismisses the criticism as "political correctness run amok."

"If this were a perfect world, serving homeless youngsters in (regular) public schools would, in fact, be the ideal," Cohn says. "But ... what you want to do is provide the best possible atmosphere, independent of political correctness."

Cohn says it's important that kids who are under a lot of stress receive extra care and attention while they're at school.

"Whatever works to try to bring some continuity to the lives of these kids is what we all have to be for," Cohn says. "I will fight mightily for (Bethune)."

Indefinite stays

Most of the youngsters at Bethune are sent from local shelters or arrive by word of mouth. They come for a day, a week, a month or the whole semester; no one really knows.

They'll stay, Dilts says, until their parents move to another shelter or another town, or, if they're lucky, into permanent housing.

"You just fill these kids up with as much good stuff as you can," he says, "because you don't know when they'll be coming back."

Opened by the school district 10 years ago, Bethune depends on private donations and volunteers to supplement an annual budget of $165,000 and a four-member staff.

On any day, Dilts and two aides may handle between five and 35 pupils, ages 4 to 14. By necessity, the course content is generic.

Dilts must educate children of all ages and levels together in one room. Math lessons are individualized, and children with similar skills are paired up in some subjects. Sometimes, a fourth-grader may be reading at a second-grade level, so an older child is paired with a younger one.

To avoid embarrassment, Dilts tells the older ones, "You're teaching this kid."

Each pupil gets two meals a day: breakfast and lunch. They read, work on computers, learn math and science, study current events and take field trips, among other things.

At the same time, they are taught social skills, get lots of praise and enjoy as much one-on-one attention as possible.

And when they leave Bethune, they walk away with new backpacks, school supplies, clothes and even toys — all of them donated.

"It's a pretty good deal," Dilts says. "You know (the kids) are going to get clothed, fed, cared for and educated."

Earlier location

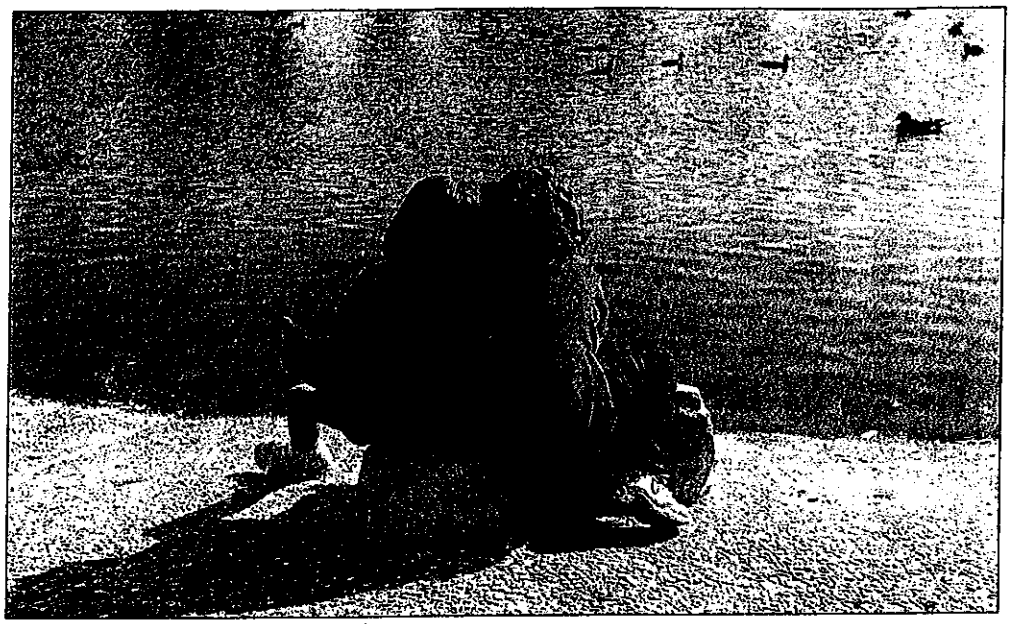
Three years ago, Bethune moved from a room in Family Shelter for the Homeless, run by Catholic Charties at 1401 Chestnut Ave., into its two portable classrooms, a stone's throw from the Terminal Island (47/103) Freeway.

The school has since been integrated into a 26-acre development called Villages at Cabrillo, a development that, when finished, promises to be among the nation's largest and most comprehensive social-service centers for the homeless.

The school's namesake, Mary McCleod Bethune, was the first black woman to head a federal office — the Division of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration — and the founder of a girls school in Daytona Beach, Fla. She died in 1955.

"I think (Bethune) would be very proud of having a school like this named after her," Dilts says. "Because (homeless children) are a population that's been forgotten, similar to the Negro women at the time."

Children end up homeless for many reasons, Dilts says. The most common are that their mothers have fled abusive husbands or that their parents have lost their jobs or become reliant on



Two young girls make fast friends on a class outing to El Dorado Park. Bethune's pupils may be in school for a day, a week, a month or a whole semester.

drugs or alcohol or have psychological problems.

Choosing Bethune over other public schools is sometimes a matter of logistics: The parents are in Long Beach temporarily and don't have the time or resources to get their child enrolled in a regular school. Difficulties in getting school or immunization records can make matters worse. Because most homeless people don't own cars, transportation can be a nightmare.

Other times, it's a matter of preference: In regular public schools, homeless kids may feel alienated and ashamed. At Bethune, every effort is made to make the children feel included and respected.

"I don't care if you haven't had a bath in five days and if you have lice — you're going to get as much respect as I do," Dilts says. "That's the beauty here. The embarrassment factor is not that big. We're all in the same boat."

Carlos, for one, appreciates that.

"It's easier," says the 10-year-old. "There's, like, 12 kids here, and they are all going through the same thing. So no one's better than you."

Lunchroom discussion

Sitting at a small table in Bethune's cozy lunch room, Carlos and his new buddy, Mark James, discuss their experiences openly.

School, they say, gives them a welcome break from the shelter where they're staying until their mothers "get settled."

Both boys say they don't like the shelter because the rules are strict. They can't, for example, have electronics, which means no TVs, radios or Game Boys. They must abide by a strict curfew and lights-out rule. They have to clean. And the only playroom available is full of "baby stuff."

As for the food: "They don't make their oatmeal right," says Mark, 9.

"Guess what they gave us this morning," asks Carlos. "Powdered eggs. They tasted just like Ajax."

How you can help

- If you want to help Bethune School, call (562) 435-2050.
- To make donations or to volunteer assistance to other local homeless organizations through the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services, call Patrick Burkhardt at (562) 570-4003 or Angela Coron at (562) 570-4001.

Like many of the roughly 2,000 children who have traveled through Bethune's revolving doors, Carlos knows too well what it's like to be homeless. He has spent most of his life moving from city to city, staying with friends and relatives. Sometimes the stints are a year or two. Other times, only a few months.

For years, he has dreamed of a home of his own. Now, his expectations are lower. He longs simply for "another shelter" or, better yet, a motel room.

"I wish we could get a kitchenette," he says.

False promises

There are signs of resentment and anger. Carlos is protective of his mom but painfully aware of the numerous promises that have been made to him in earnest only to be broken time and again.

When Mark shows optimism that his mom will "get a place really fast," Carlos cuts in with a less optimistic view.

"Parents say some things," he says, frowning, "but it really doesn't turn out most of th time. Like, they say they're going to get you scooter when they get the money. Then the don't."

The different perspectives emerge agai when the two boys are asked what they'd lik for Christmas.

"A home," Mark says, just above a whisper.

"A scooter," Carlos says in a louder voice "Then a home."

They agree on one thing, though: It's not fai that they don't have a place to live. Are they jeal ous of kids who do?

"All the time," says Carlos.

"Every day," says Mark. But the two quickl rebound from talk of hardships in their lives They whisper to each other and laugh; they jok and play. To look at them, one would never know they were homeless. Each is well-scrubbed an dressed in a clean shirt, pants and shoes.

And they're smiling. At the end of the inter view, they sprint out the door and onto the playground.

End of the day

It's 3:10 in the afternoon. A school bus wil soon roll up outside the chain-link fence an take most of the children to a bus stop, where their parents are supposed to be waiting.

When they leave, the staff will wonde whether the children will be OK and which one will be back tomorrow.

"Half the time, we have no clue where they go," Dilts says. "It's kind of sad. You're sending 4- and 5-year-olds (on the bus), and you're just hoping someone's there to pick them up."

The uncertainty and the poignancy make teaching at Bethune a challenge.

Testing is out of the question, as are grade cards, parent-teacher conferences and a scheduled curriculum. The closest thing to a yearbook is an album full of pictures.

The staff tries to make the lessons challenging for all, but the coursework remains fluid. plans flexible.

Dilts understands, for example, that some youngsters are in situations ill-suited to studying, so a child whose homework isn't finished may be gently scolded but isn't kept from recess.

The staff must be equal parts teacher and counselor. They constantly want to do more. they say, and they sometimes worry about their pupils when the sun sets.

"The kids really are the victims," says Paula Oba, Bethune's steadfast administrator.

After three years at the school, Dilts says resources are still far too low. He's tired, physically and emotionally. But he's still passionate about his work and has learned a valuable coping mechanism that helps him through each day.

It's the same mechanism he learned during his days as a substitute teacher, he says. He does what he can, then shelves the rest and heads home.

"At the end of the day," he says. "I (have) to move on."

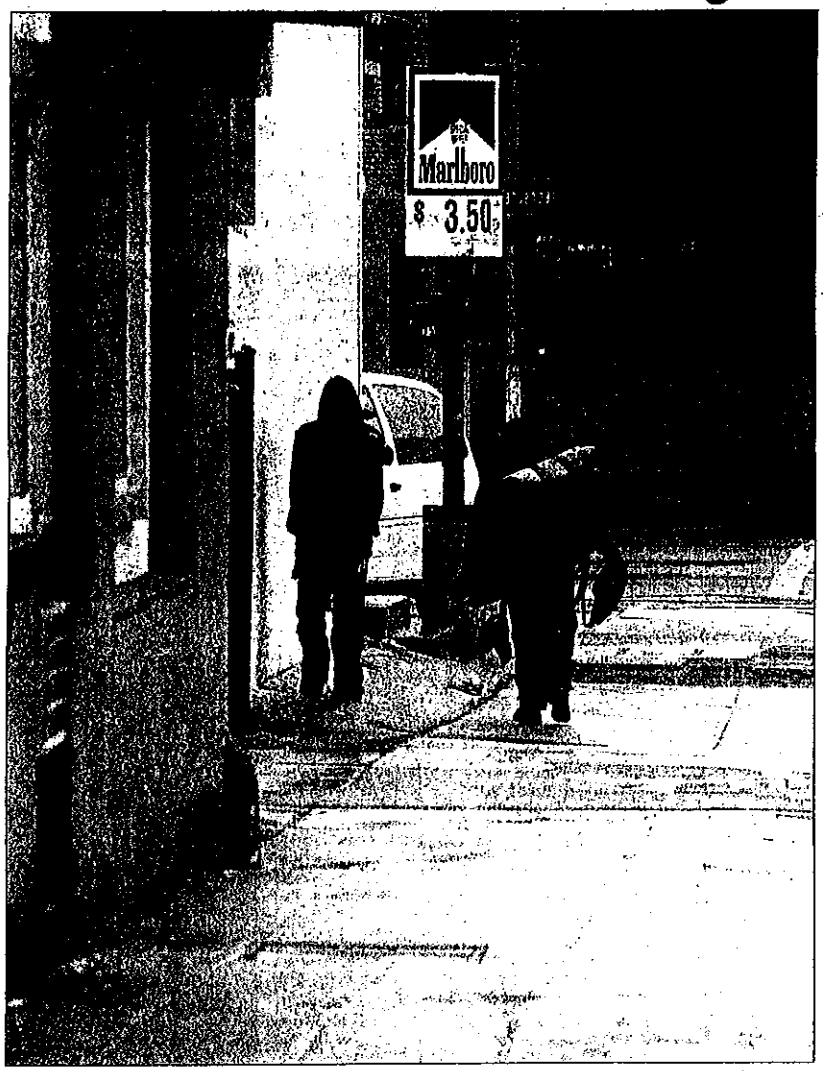
Thursday: *Runaways and throwaways — homeless youth on the move.*

Press-Telegram

THURSDAY, MARCH 15, 2001

Homeless in Hollywood

Teen runaways



Two homeless teen-agers walk through the rain along Cahuenga Boulevard in Hollywood — a popular destination for runaways throughout Los Angeles County and beyond.

By Wendy Thomas Russell
Staff writer

HOLLYWOOD — It's after dark in Hollywood, and the Salvation Army's drop-in center has just come alive with the heavy feet and hardened faces of runaway teen-agers.

Most of the teens, exhausted from street life, sit down to their only hot meals — often their only meals — of the day.

Fifth in a series

Photos by Brittany M. Solo / Press-Telegram

Some sift through a closet full of used clothes, searching for sweatshirts to warm them through the night and shoes to soothe their aching soles.

Others line up to take long, hot showers, removing several layers of dirt and grime from their bodies and redressing in the same filthy jeans they've been wearing for months.

If there's a glamorous side to running away from home, it hardly exists here.

"A lot of (runaways) come to the

PLEASE SEE **HOMELESS / A10**

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"If I had a chance to go back home, I'd go home in a minute. Nobody really wants to live like this."

Tina, who ran away at age 17.

Displaying her pregnant belly, this 18-year-old ran away from her Long Beach home last year and headed to Hollywood. Now, she lives as a squatter, making her bed alongside other young runaways in an abandoned building. She has no firm plans for delivering her baby or for shelter once the baby is born.

HOMELESS: Some teens run away, some kicked out

CONTINUED FROM **A1**

streets thinking it will be fun," says Roberto Coronado, the drop-in center's director. "A lot of people have that misconception."

The center is a peephole into a world where education involves terms like "survival sex," disease runs rampant and role models are found in criminals, prostitutes and drug addicts.

A Long Beach runaway we'll call Tina left her mother's home and took the 25-mile trek to "Tinseltown" last year at age 17.

Now, she's 18 years old, six months pregnant and living out of a vacant building.

Sure, she says, she has enjoyed her freedom and independence. She has even made friends on the streets. But the life she chose isn't the one she wants for herself or her unborn baby.

"If I had a chance to go back home, I'd go home in a minute," says Tina. "Nobody really wants to live like this."

The Way In Youth Services, which runs the drop-in center, is one of several Hollywood agencies designed to assist homeless youth. Some provide places where kids can be fed, clothed, given blankets, provided bus tokens and offered counseling. Others provide emergency shelter or transitional housing for longer-term care.

This loose structure of services, combined with Hollywood's reputation for tolerance, diversity and excitement, attracts youngsters in droves.

An estimated 7,000 to 8,000 young people between the ages of 12 and 24 live unaccompanied and homeless in Los Angeles County, according to a 1997 study by the Division of Adolescent Medicine at Los Angeles Children's Hospital.

According to the report, 32 percent of homeless youth are ages 12 to 17. The rest are between the ages of 18 and 24 but are considered youths because of their emotional immaturity.

"They really are like kids," says Nick Taylor, of the Los Angeles Youth Network.

Not all runaways live as squatters inside abandoned buildings and under bridges. Not all go to bed hungry, wake up cold and carry weapons to lessen their perpetual fear. And not all of them avoid baths for long periods of time just so men won't want to rape them.

Roberto Coronado, director of the Way In Youth Services' drop-in center, talks with a homeless youth — one of an estimated 7,000 to 8,000 residing in L.A. County.

Runaways exist on a continuum, Taylor explains.

- At one end is the latchkey kid who gets a bad grade on her report card and runs away for the night.
- In the middle is the "sofa surfer," who drifts from one friend's couch to the next for as long as he can.
- And at the other end, Taylor says, is the "chronic squatter," who has become so ingrained in street life that he's likely to go from runaway kid to homeless adult.

"I truly believe that some of these kids are going to be on the streets for the rest of their lives," Coronado says.

Fifty-three percent of street kids polled in the 1997 Children's Hospital report said they'd lived in an abandoned squat, 46 percent said they lived with a friend, 38 percent said they lived on the street or in a car, and 33 percent said they'd lived in a shelter.

In Long Beach, services for runaways are minimal.

Boys Town Emergency Residential Care Center, an offshoot of Boys Town in Omaha, Neb., is a short-term group home with room for eight girls and eight boys, ages 11 to 17.

Most of the slots are filled up by abused and neglected children, says Daniel Rodriguez, who coordinates Boys Town's Runaway and Homeless Youth Program. The rest of the beds go to runaways or "throwaways" — a term given to kids whose parents have kicked them out.

Throwaways rarely show up at Boys Town, but Rodriguez says he screens 75 to 85 calls a month from parents whose children have run away — or want to.

While definitions of abuse are fluid, Rodriguez says only about 10 percent of the runaways he meets have been physically abused. Far more, he says, simply have been the victims of bad parenting or are giving parents a run for their money.

When asked, kids frequently complain about strict rules or lack of parental involvement: "I have no room to breathe," they say. "No one listens to me," or "No one cares about me."

Parents' complaints about their runaway kids center on drug use, sexual orientation, gang involvement, school truancy and disrespect for authority.

That's not the case in Hollywood, says Taylor, who helps run the LA Youth Network's drop-in program on Cahuenga Boulevard.

There, he estimates, at least 80 percent of the runaways are fleeing some sort of abuse. And most would fall under the jurisdiction of the Department of Children and Family Services if they trusted adults enough to report the abuse.

"If every adult in their life has abused, neglected or abandoned them," Taylor says, the kids end up distrusting any kind of authority.

The fact that runaways' homeless-

PLEASE SEE **HOMELESS / A11**

HOMELESS: Drop-in center closest thing to family

CONTINUED FROM A10

ness is by choice makes their situations no less tragic, Taylor says. They suffer in numerous ways.

• Poor nutrition, poor hygiene and reckless lifestyles cause frequent illness.

• The streets leave deep emotional scars, and rampant depression. "They can't see beyond tomorrow," Rodriguez says.

• Most are assaulted for their money within the first 24 hours of becoming homeless, Taylor says. And fear remains a constant bedtime companion.

• Many runaways eventually become so desperate that they allow themselves to be exploited by older homeless men who tell them, "I'll protect you but you have to have sex with me ... or run these drugs for me," Taylor says.

Adds Rodriguez: "They become a commodity on the streets."

"The irony is that the very thing they're running away from at home is the very thing they get sucked into on the streets," Taylor says. "It's a cycle of abuse."

How you can help

Several area agencies offer help to kids who have, or want to, run away from home. Here are a few:

• **Boys Town Emergency Residential Care Center's** national hotline is (800) 448-3000.

• **Los Angeles Youth Network's** national hotline is (800) 843-5200.

• **The Way In Youth Services'** main number is (323) 469-2946.

• To make donations or to volunteer assistance to other local homeless organizations through the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services, call Patrick Burkhardt at (562) 570-4003 or Angela Coron at (562) 570-4001.

At the drop-in center, everyone seems to know each other.

On this night, a small TV with a slightly fuzzy version of a Kung-Fu movie wins the gazes of a dozen or so runaways. At the moment, it's the closest thing these kids have to a living room — and a family.

It's clear that several in the group squat together, although no one will talk about particular squats unless they've already been "burned out," or vacated during police raids.

On this night, a young couple and their three blond, puffy-eyed children — ages 2, 1 and 8 months — show up with two strollers and some plastic bags in search of a place to stay. They've been kicked out of all the area homeless shelters for one reason or another and look to be running out of options.

Their presence creates a stir among several of the squatters, who have a meeting to decide whether the family can stay with them.

Two young men, who call themselves squat leaders, finally decide it's out of the question.

"No kids in the squat," one announces. "A squat is no place for a kid."

Just shy of the center's 11 p.m. closing time, the family contacts a hotel downtown that will accept vouchers. They're OK for the night, but tomorrow will likely bring more uncertainty.

Across the room, Tina is making a free call to her mother in Long Beach. She is describing how she spent the day looking for a studio apartment she could afford with her Supplemental Security Income benefits of $545 a month. Although unclear, her disability seems to be mental rather than physical.

The call ends badly.

Tina's mom hangs up on her.

"She always does that," Tina says, slamming down the receiver.

"We talk," she adds later, "but she won't let me come home."

Meanwhile, others seem thirsty to tell their stories.

One 19-year-old woman from Washington D.C. smiles as she talks about how a drag queen beat her up earlier that day. The batterer was a prostitute, she says, who perceived her as a threat to his business.

"A guy in a dress kicked my ass," she says. "I really shouldn't have to deal with that kind of stuff."

The woman, who is olive-skinned and pretty and traveling with her dog and her violin, treats her homelessness more as a stage in life than a way of life. She seems to possess the hope that someone will someday reach in and take her away from the underpass she's living beneath at the moment.

"I'm looking to find a handsome, nice, rich guy," she says, breaking into a wide grin.

But trauma lurks beneath the surface of most grins. Tales of childhood abuse are easy to find, Coronado says, as are signs of alcoholism, drug addiction, molestation, abandonment. A 21-year-old man who says he's been on his own for the last four years freely admits he needs "anger management."

He says he beats people up on the street at the slightest provocation.

"The streets make you angry," he says. "It makes you not care."

Coronado says this kind of moral and ethical deterioration is common among street kids. It's what allows them to rob and steal, to prostitute themselves for money or for protection, to get involved in drugs and gangs, and to become violent.

But Coronado figures the kids might care more if anyone showed an interest in them.

"They think no one cares," he says. "Actually, in some ways, it's true. No one does care."

Solutions may be hard to find, Coronado says, but they exist.

He points to a lack of youth services, particularly transitional housing, as the first major obstacle to ending youth homelessness. A lack of therapy for these youngsters, he says, is the other.

Early detection is mandatory. Kids, he says, must be educated in school about their options. If they are going to leave home, they should first talk to other family members and then to school counselors to find alternative housing. If all else fails, they should go straight to emergency shelters.

No matter how bad things seem, Coronado says, the streets are the last place a kid wants to be.

Coming Friday: A kid's life in a homeless shelter.

A young woman searches through a used clothes closet at a Hollywood drop-in center run by The Way In Youth Services, part of the Salvation Army. The center offers clean clothes, hot meals and long showers to youths in need.

A Kung-Fu movie playing on the drop-in center's television attracts the gazes of about a dozen young people, as well as program director Roberto Coronado, far right. For some, this is the closest thing they have to a living room — and a family.

"I remember saying, 'If you can't listen to me, then you'll just have to go.' It blew my mind that she did it!"

Angela Data, mother of runaway

Home is where her heart is

Runaway teen reunited with mom

By Wendy Thomas Russell
Staff writer

LONG BEACH — Ashlee Calaoagan doesn't remember what the fight was about. Could have been anything, really.

The 13-year-old Wilson High School student had been having one argument after the next with her mom — mostly about rules, curfews and having a boyfriend.

Finally, last August, she figured she'd had enough.

"We just got in a big fight," says Ashlee, now 14. "My mom went to my aunt's house, and I left while she was gone."

With visions of San Francisco swimming in her head, Ashlee went straight to her boyfriend's house. That's where, she says, she got talked out of leaving town.

"I stayed the night there," she says, "and then (my boyfriend) took me to to get in trouble."

After two weeks at Boys Town, an emergency youth shelter for both girls and boys in Long Beach, Ashlee was back at home.

Roughly 3 percent of the nation's homeless population are runaway youth, according to the National Coalition for the Homeless.

The reasons include disagreements at home, divorce trauma, physical and sexual abuse, conflicts about sexual identity or sexual orientation, and substance abuse.

Ashlee's problems were relatively minor and her homelessness was fleeting. But the experience, she says, was enough to show her that the streets are a scary place.

"I won't do it again," she says. "It's not that fun.

"It's like the type of thing that would get really scary after a while. The only people that are going to take you in are people that just want something from

Then there's the fear of being caught.

"I was afraid to go outside," she says, "because I thought the police were going to arrest me."

For Angela Data, Ashlee's mom, the situation was a nightmare. She doesn't remember the nature of the fight either, but she says it came down to Ashlee's not wanting to be told what to do.

"I guess she thought I was too strict," Data says. "I may be too strict ... but I want (what's) good for my children.

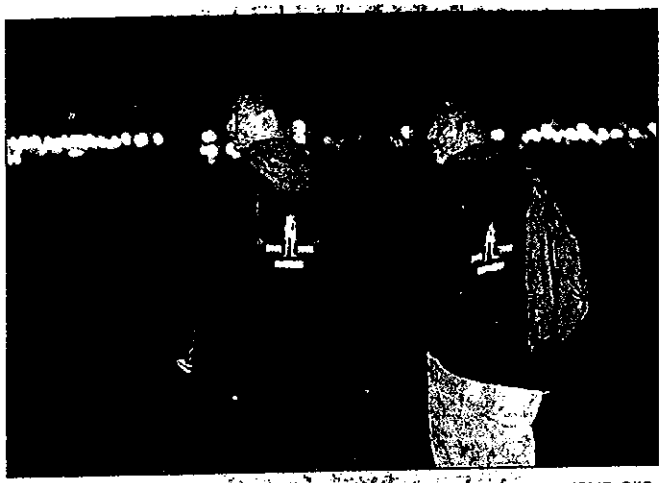
"I remember saying, 'If you can't listen to me, then you'll just have to go.' It blew my mind that she did it!"

Data says her "heart dropped" when she returned home to find Ashlee missing.

Now, she says, she and her daughter are working things out "one day at a time."

"She's still being a teen-ager," Data says. "But I'm teaching her to be a

Angela Data, left, and her daughter, Ashlee Calaogan, share laugh outside their Long Beach home. Ashlee ran away fr home last summer but was ready to return after two weeks Boys Town



Walking a Long Beach bike path in search of runaways are Daniel Rodriguez, right, of Boys Town Emergency Residential Care Center, and an unidentified volunteer.

Patrol team brings help to street kids

By Wendy Thomas Russell
Staff writer

When Daniel Rodriguez comes upon homeless men and women on the streets of Long Beach, he makes any number of assumptions.

Perhaps, he thinks, they lost their jobs and homes years ago. Perhaps they're struggling with mental illness or alcoholism or drug dependence. Perhaps they've worn out their welcome in the local homeless shelters and simply have nowhere to go.

But when Rodriguez sees a homeless teen-ager standing alone on a darkened corner, with tattered jeans and shaggy hair, his assumptions are different.

That child, Rodriguez thinks, doesn't *need* to be there; he *wants* to be.

Rodriguez should know. He coordinates the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program for Boys Town Emergency Residential Care Center, Long Beach's only emergency shelter specifically for youth.

His position puts the 41-year-old on the front lines of local efforts to reunite transient boys and girls with their families — a difficult task, since most runaways have, or feel they have, good reasons for leaving.

"When I think of the homeless (kids)," he says, "I think they've made up their minds."

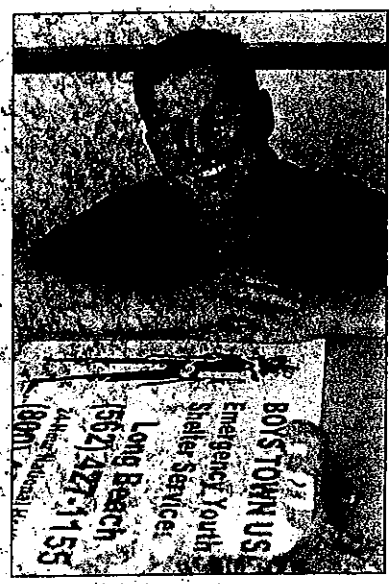
In his office at Boys Town at 350 W. Wardlow Road, Rodriguez pulls out a 5-foot-tall map of Long Beach, with parks colored green and numbered flags placed at points where runaways have been known to congregate.

Rodriguez has flagged beaches, downtown alleys, the old Naval Yard and areas alongside the Los Angeles River.

Transient kids, he says, also can be found in restaurants, arcades and Metro Blue Line stations, stealing rides to Hollywood, where several shelters cater to homeless youth.

Every couple of months, Rodriguez puts together a search party of sorts — volunteers who blanket the hangouts armed with cards advertising Boys Town services.

The volunteers are instructed to give cards to all kids who look as though they could be runaways. Maybe one in 20 cards dispensed is actually put in the hands of a displaced youth, Rodriguez says, but it's worth it.



Daniel Rodriguez hands out care packages containing toiletries and food to kids thought to be living on the streets.

Clues to runaways

The volunteers target kids based on several factors. Rodriguez says the biggest clue comes from circling a block a couple of times to "see who's moving and who's not moving." Those standing in one place will get cards, he says.

Appearances matter, too. Their clothes may be dirty or tattered, and their hair probably hasn't been cut in a while.

But the best way to tell if a kid is living on the streets, Rodriguez says, is to offer him a care package — a bag containing bottled water, potato chips, a toothbrush and deodorant, for instance.

He pulls out a variety of care packages from a backpack. "If they're receptive to something like this," he says, "then they're legitimately homeless."

The hardest time to spot runaways is during school hours. That's because most are either in school or have learned to avoid detection by truancy officers.

"They integrate well" into crowds, Rodriguez says, and move stealthily from one place to the next.

Even when he does track them down, he says, it's difficult to get runaways to go voluntarily to Boys Town. They're allowed to stay for only two weeks before being placed elsewhere, usually with their families. And many teens would rather get to know the streets than face their families again.

"Wherever they've been has been so painful, they really don't want to visit that again," Rodriguez says.

Add to that a teen-ager's strong will and false sense of invincibility.

"They want to be independent," he says. "They want to be adults. They're so sick of people telling (them) what to do."

Rodriguez knows he can only do so much. Boys Town, a short-term group home, has 16 slots for kids ages 11 to 17, and most of them are filled up by abused and neglected children.

Those who enter voluntarily are assessed and placed elsewhere, usually within a couple of weeks. Some move in with a relative. Others are admitted into a long-term shelter or youth academy.

Most, Rodriguez says, go back home.

Press-Telegram

FRIDAY, MARCH 16, 2001

'I cannot thank God enough'

Where homeless kids find shelter

Homeless mother Dana Flores plays a game with one of her daughters, Page, 3. Flores and her children were staying at Lydia House, a homeless shelter in Long Beach. Photo by Steven Georges / Press-Telegram

Lydia House runs on rules and religion

By Wendy Thomas Russell
Staff writer

Sixth in a series

LONG BEACH — Little about Lydia House resembles a home. The bedrooms are spotless and slightly sterile. The TV is padlocked in a wooden closet. And the dormitory-like hallways are lit by fluorescent bulbs.

But the Gospel-based shelter is as cozy as it needs to be for Lisa Washington and her three children, who became homeless two months ago and sought shelter there.

One of a handful of area homeless shelters that accept children, Lydia House, which has headquarters at 1335 Pacific Ave. in Long Beach, serves as a sanctuary for hundreds of women and children every year. It's a safe place at a confidential location where they can be fed, clothed and advised while saving

PLEASE SEE HOMELESS / A12

Four-month-old Tinito Niles gets a little extra attention at Lydia House, where Tinito's mother is enrolled in parenting classes. Photo by Steven Georges / Press-Telegram

THE SERIES

HOMELESS KIDS
INVISIBLE VICTIMS

- **Sunday:** About a quarter of homeless people are children.
- **Monday:** The sad tale of one family's unraveling.
- **Tuesday:** The Play House, a preschool for homeless kids.
- **Wednesday:** Long Beach's special grade school for homeless children.
- **Thursday:** Runaways and throwaways -- homeless youth on the move.
- **Today: A kid's life in a homeless shelter.**
- **Sunday:** What's being done to help homeless children.

"What's important to us is that they have some relationship with the Lord. We not only feed (the homeless) physically, but we feed them spiritually as well."

Cindy Thomas, Lydia House director

HOMELESS: Chance for families to gain stability

CONTINUED FROM A1

money to get back on their feet.

"I cannot thank God enough for the Lydia House," says Washington, 35, whose family was among several staying at the shelter one recent night. "They've been nothing but a help."

Shelter life

It's 6:30 p.m., and the residents have eaten their dinner and finished their daily chores, which include washing dishes, cleaning the kitchen and sweeping the dining room. Across the hall, about a dozen kids of all ages crowd into a small playroom. A sign reading "Jesus is your friend" hangs on one wall, and a limited supply of toys and books keeps some kids occupied while their moms finish their chores.

A little later, everyone will retire quietly to their bedrooms, which hold from three to six beds apiece along with side tables.

The kids will take their baths and do their homework, their moms will attend a mandatory Bible study, and then silence will fall on this home away from home.

While Lydia House isn't a place where Washington wants to stay much longer, she notices what the shelter offers her family.

Her oldest daughter, Amanda, 13, notices what it lacks.

During an interview, Amanda slouches in an arm chair and thumbs lazily through a Bible in the shelter's living room, where several time-worn sofas and chairs are arranged into smaller areas, like a hotel lobby.

A straight-A student at her middle school, Amanda is beginning to crave sleepovers with her friends and going to the movies at night. She wants to listen to the radio and watch TV.

Tough adjustment

Of Washington's three daughters, Amanda is having the most trouble adjusting to the constraints of shelter life. Asked what she misses most about her home, she thinks quietly for a moment.

"The freedom to do what you want," she says, "because, in here, there are rules."

Those rules range from the simple to the strict.

All adults are required to attend nightly Bible study. Children must be respectful — no running or yelling. No one may curse, and smoking is restricted to a back patio.

Electronics such as radios, video games, cellular phones and pagers are banned, along with "objectionable literature." No food or drinks can be brought inside. Shoes must be worn at all times, and visiting other people's rooms is prohibited.

Guests must abide by a 5 p.m. curfew, children must be enrolled in school and everyone is assigned chores.

Breaking a rule is a strike; three strikes and you're out. Director Cindy Thomas calls the rules basic common courtesy and says they're meant to inject responsibility, consistency and structure into the lives of guests who may have been missing those qualities.

"Some of these kids haven't had regular meals three times a day, a bed time (or) a wake-up time," Thomas says.

Jordan Washington, center, is an animated 4-year-old who came to Lydia House with her mom and two sisters. While she enjoys playing with other kids at the shelter, she says she misses her cat and TV cartoons.

Photo by Steven Georges / Press-Telegram

Now, she says, "they can be stable in their families."

Religious base

Religion plays a key role at Lydia House.

"What's important to us is that they have some relationship with the Lord," Thomas says. "We not only feed (the homeless) physically, but we feed them spiritually as well."

Freedom isn't what Washington's two other daughters miss the most. Jordan, an animated 4-year-old whose spirit and energy keep the family laughing, launches into a goofy dance in the middle of the room when it's her turn to answer.

"I want my own money," she says, almost singing her words. "I want dollars. I want (my cat) Tiger. I want Pokemon."

Brittany, 8, smiles with a mouth full of braces and offers a sobering contrast.

"I miss my daddy," she says.

Her statement makes Washington take a deep breath. Her husband is out of the picture for the first time in 14 years, she says. Her decision to split followed years of abuse and bad decision-making on his part.

It was under her husband's control, she says, that the family ended up homeless two months ago — evicted for the second time in their lives.

"I said ... 'This is not the type of lifestyle I want to live,'" she says, when the kids are out of the room. "It was the hardest decision that I've ever had to make."

Tears stream down her face.

"Even if he didn't love me enough to put a roof over our heads, I do love him. And the kids love him — they adore him."

Washington said it was a tough transition into homelessness. She struggled with her own stereotypes of homeless people, and worried how her and her daughters would be perceived by others. Soon, she says, she began to understand that homelessness has many faces — all of them equal under God.

"I felt like I was different (from other homeless people)," she says. "I realized I am not different ... I am homeless. I am *them*."

Job and home

But the worst is over. Washington has found a home with a lease and an option to buy and has a steady job with the U.S. Veterans Initiative, making $25,000 a year.

Lydia House, like all shelters, can only do so much for the homeless. Whether privately or publicly funded, shelters must operate within a budget, taking in only a limited number of people for a limited period of time.

Most cap stays at about a month, although they may be flexible as long as the family is working toward a goal.

Shelters tend to be easy to access, admitting families in the middle of the night if necessary. Many cater to the homeless in general, while others target substance abusers, victims of domestic violence or those with HIV and AIDS.

Gone are the days when shelters acted simply as community bedrooms. More and more now offer career placement, telephones and message services, mailboxes, internship programs, mental-health assessments, medical referrals, laundry rooms and so on.

Through the staff at Lydia House, for instance, women can be linked to outside programs on subjects such as drug treatment, parenting and job training.

At the New Image Emergency Shelter for the Homeless, a local cold-weather shelter that operates annually between December and March, case

PLEASE SEE HOMELESS /A13

Lisa Washington, pictured here with her daughter Brittany, 8, talks frankly about her hardships.

Photo by Steven Georges / Press-Telegram

"I felt like I was different (from other homeless people). I realized I am not different. I am homeless. I am *them*."

Lisa Washingto homeless moth

HOMELESS: Lessons in responsibility, goals, wor

CONTINUED FROM A12

managers found permanent housing for 68 of the 83 families that sought help last winter, says Executive Director Brenda Wilson.

But shelters offer no easy fix. Families are expected to start helping themselves as soon as they walk in the door. The structure and strictness make some people describe them as voluntary prisons.

Taking responsibility

Vanessa Romain, of Catholic Charities' Seaton Residence and Family Shelter, 123 E. 14th St. in Long Beach, says families must take responsibility for their lives, set goals and work for their place at the shelter.

"It's not a place you come lay your head and do what you want to do," Romain says. "There's no more 'poor me.'"

It's true, says Romain, that many families have hit rock bottom by the time they enter the shelter. They've spent all their money on motel rooms, suffered damaging relationships or exhausted all their resources.

So there's a certain amount of hand-holding, too.

Case managers evaluate each family's situation and future prospects. They become counselors, financiers and advocates.

They act as brokers, securing housing for down-and-outers who command little credibility on their own, and then follow up with the families.

Often, money is given to families facing eviction — a preventive approach to homelessness that's becoming increasingly popular.

One day in December, a 22-year-old pregnant woman named Theresa Richmond ended up at the Seaton Residence with her 39-year-old boyfriend and their 3-year-old son.

Sitting in an office at the shelter, Richmond wore a Lion King T-shirt, baggy sweat pants and dirty sneakers, her hair pulled back in a pony tail. Running her hand through her son's black hair, she spoke softly, mostly in fragmented sentences.

For two weeks, she said, she'd lived in a hotel on Long Beach's Anaheim Street. Before that, she'd been living with her mom in San Bernardino. Then her boyfriend came back into her life, she said, and she wasn't allowed to stay.

She offered no reason why.

After a brief stint fending for themselves, the couple ran out of money. They checked into the shelter with two blankets, three bags of clothing and little Benjamin's toys.

Uneasy feeling

Richmond said she felt uneasy coming to the shelter and had a hard time with communal eating, among other things. But it got better, she said.

"Everyone makes you feel comfortable," she said. "If I need anything, I just have to ask."

But if getting used to shelter life is hard, getting out of the shelters is even harder, warns Kim Crawford of 1736 Family Crisis Center, whose addresses are kept confidential. That's why so many families end up just hopping from one shelter to another, from one friend's house to the next.

Getting off the streets means finding a job, which can be difficult for those with little education and few job skills. It means finding affordable child care — a challenge for even middle-class families. And it means getting the kids enrolled in school.

And, most importantly, it means finding a permanent place to live — preferably someplace close to your new job and the baby-sitter and your kid's school. And someplace accepts Section 8, a popular re sidy funded by the Departm Housing and Urban Developm

It's exhausting, Crawford but "that's pretty much as s ful as they come."

Erik White, 6, keeps his mom, Ronika, and his younger sister, Ejanae, smiling in a Lydia House bedroom Residents may not shut their bedroom doors, so privacy is often hard to come by.

Photo by Brittany M. Solo/ Press-Tel

A GUIDE TO SHELTERS AND SERVICES

The Long Beach area offers several short-term shelters and transitional-housing options for homeless people. Some cater to drug abusers or victims of domestic violence, while others welcome any homeless person.

Not all shelters are open to children, and most of those that are accept only women with children, not men. Each shelter has its own age limitations and house rules.

Those that admit children include the following:

HOMELESS SHELTERS:

• **New Image Emergency Shelter,** headquartered at the Long Beach Multi-Service Center, 1301 W. 12th St. in Long Beach. (562) 733-1147. From December through March, New Image gives out short-term vouchers for motels, hotels and meals and helps families find affordable housing. There is no age limit or maximum number of children allowed.

• **Lydia House,** a subsidiary of the Long Beach Rescue Mission, 1335 Pacific Ave. in Long Beach. (562) 591-1292. This privately funded, Gospel-based mission for women and children has 33 beds in nine bedrooms. Most families stay 30 to 45 days on average. Girls of all ages are allowed; boys must be under the age of 13.

• **The Seaton Residence/Family Shelter,** 123 E. 14th St. in Long Beach. (562) 388-7670. Run by Catholic Charities, this is a 30-day shelter that takes families with children under age 18. Maximum occupancy is about 50 people.

• **Rio Hondo Temporary Home,** 12300 4th St., Building 213, in Norwalk. This is a three-month shelter with space for 82 people. Single parents and families are welcome.

• **LTD Emergency Shelter,** 15509 S. White Ave. in Compton. (310) 608-3763. LTD has room for five people, including single women with children, with no specific time limit. Girls under age 17 are allowed; boys must be 13 or younger.

• **Compton Welfare Rights Organization's Shelter for Homeless Women and Children,** 528 W. Almond Ave. in Compton. (310) 631-5193. This two-month shelter accepts about 36 women and children up to age 10.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SHELTERS:

These shelters do not publicize their addresses because of the possibility that women's abusive partners will show up.

• **WomenShelter of Long Beach.** (562) 437-4663. WomenShelter accepts abused women with no more than five children up to age 17. There is space for eight families. Stays are limited to 30 days.

• **1736 Family Crisis Center.** (562) 388-7652 and (310) 379-3620. With several shelters in Los Angeles County, 1736 provides space for dozens of women and children up to age 17. Length of stays vary.

• **Angel Step Inn, Downey.** (562) 906-5060. Run by Southern California Alcohol and Drug Programs, Angel Step Inn has 13 beds for substance abusers and victims of domestic violence, along with their children. Kids must be under the age of 12, and the maximum stay is 45 days.

• **Su Casa Family Crisis and Support Center, Artesia.** (562) 402-4888. Su Casa provides 22 beds to single women with children under age 12, for up to 30 days.

• **Carrie Caldwell Enterprise's House of the Redeemed, Compton.** (310) 638-9193. Single women with children are welcome at this six-month shelter. There's room for six people, although boys must be under the age of 10 and girls must be under 15.

• **Interval House Crisis Shelters and Centers for Victims of Domestic Violence,** serving Long Beach and Orange County. (562) 594-4555 or (714) 891-8121. Interval House has an emergency center as well as safe houses and transitional housing for women with children of any age. Stays in the emergency shelter average 30 to 45 days.

SUBSTANCE-ABUSE CENTERS:

• **Baby Step Inn for Pregnant Mothers,** 1755 Freeman Ave., Long Beach. (562) 986-5525. Funded by Southern California Alcohol and Drug Programs, Baby Step is a six-month treatment program with a maximum capacity of 24 people, including clients and their children. No children over the age of 3 are allowed.

• **Baby Step II and III,** 757 Loma Vista Dr., Long Beach. (562) 435-4771. A sister program of Baby Step Inn, Baby Step II is a six- to 12-month treatment program for pregnant and postpartum women. Children under age 10 are welcome to join their mothers, but mothers may have no more than two in the program at a time.

• **La Casita de las Mamas,** 10603 Downey Ave., Downey. (562) 218-1868. Parenting mothers and pregnant women are welcome to this program, run by Southern California Alcohol and Drug Programs. Children must be under age 12, but exceptions can be made. Thirty beds are available for a maximum of six months.

• **Women and Children's Residential Program,** 2101 Magnolia Ave., Long Beach. (562) 218-1868. Run by Tarzana Treatment Centers, the program provides beds for up to 80 pregnant women, single mothers and children under age 5 for up to nine months.

TRANSITIONAL HOUSIN

• **Christian Outreach Appeal,** h
tered at 515 E. Third St. in Long Bea
432-1440. Twelve transitional apartn
offered to families with children, by
only, for up to two years.

• **New Image Transitional Hous**
gram, headquartered at 401 E. Ocea
Long Beach. (562) 983-7289. This one-
gram is offered to eight single parents
dren.

• **Angel Step Too,** 16314 Cornut
Bellflower. (562) 461-9272. Angel Ste
six-month transitional-housing pro
substance abusers and victims of dom
lence. Mothers and girls up to ag
allowed.

• **Su Casa Family Crisis and**
Center, Artesia. (562) 461-3956. Su
vides transitional housing for victims
tic violence. Children must be unde
Twenty-four beds are available for
stays.

• **Substance Abuse Foundation**
Beach, 3125 E. 7th St., Long Beach.
7755. Transitional housing is offered
women with children of any age. The s
program is provided for about 30 pe
time. In addition, the foundation provi
sitional housing to people with HIV
including single mothers with childre
program, about six beds are available
four months.

Information provided by Shelte
Partnerships and by individua
shelters.

Press-Telegram

SUNDAY, MARCH 18, 2001 $1 (plus tax)

SPECIAL REPORT

Homeless kids: Finding solutions

Comprehensive approach working in L.B.

Sixteen-month-old Julie Gutierrez stands alone on the patio of Lydia House, a Long Beach homeless shelter for women and children — m
of whom have been abused. Julie is one of about two dozen children staying at the shelter on this winter night.

Homeless kids: Invisible victims


Timothy Stiles


DJ Clemmons Wicker


Mark James


Christian Cordova

"What we do is help them rebuild their lives."

Tanya Tull, Beyond Shelter's found

By Wendy Thomas Russell
Staff writer

Some things are beyond debate: Kids shouldn't have to worry about paying the rent. They shouldn't go to bed hungry. They shouldn't move around so often that it's impossible to stay in school.

They shouldn't, but they do.

Every night, an estimated 9,000 children are homeless somewhere in Los Angeles County and as many as 1.2 million are homeless somewhere in the United States.

These youngsters have made no bad decisions; they've committed no wrongs. They are innocent victims.

So what can be done for them — for 3-year-old Kayla Delatorre or 1-year-old Christian Cordova or 16-month-old Julie Gutierrez? The answers from homeless advocates are as complicated as they are varied.

The bottom line is that "there's no easy fix," says Edith Pollach, a member of the Long Beach Housing Coalition.

"Homelessness is a reflection of many things that exist in our society and the lack of many things that should exist in our society," she says. "When you're looking at a plan to end homelessness, you're looking at all these factors that are part of people's lives."

Photos by Brittany M. Solo / Press-Telegram

The factors include housing, child care, jobs and job training, health care, education and support services.

But two success stories have emerged on Long Beach's Westside — the Multi-Service Center and Villages at Cabrillo. Rather than dealing with individual aspects of homelessness, both take a comprehensive approach.

"If you have job training but no jobs, or housing-placement services without affordable housing," Pollach says, "it's like having a train that ... never goes to a destination."

The Multi-Service Center, a buzzing hub at 1301 W. 12th St., is designed to find shelter, jobs and health care for people in need.

PLEASE SEE HOMELESS / A10

HOMELESS KIDS
INVISIBLE VICTIMS

How to help


Kayla Delatorre

• To make donations or to volunteer for local homeless organizations through the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services, call Patrick Burkhardt at (562) 570-4003 or Angela Coron at (562) 570-4001.

See facts /A10

CONTINUED FROM A1

The city, the lead agency running the center, sees itself as a support beam for private, nonprofit organizations, says Long Beach Homeless Coordinator Patrick Burkhardt.

"Services," he says, "are provider-driven here in the city."

In addition to housing the Play House, a preschool and day-care center for homeless kids under age 5, the center provides case managers who work with each homeless family to devise action plans, Burkhardt says.

It also provides mail services so the homeless can receive welfare checks and food stamps, a mental health clinic, a disabled resources center, laundry and shower facilities, shelter referrals and substance-abuse counseling.

The center pools the resources of many agencies and organizations — including Beyond Shelter, an innovative program with a bureau in Long Beach that has shifted about 2,000 families into permanent housing since 1989.

"We help the family find housing, negotiate the lease, overcome the bad credit history, overcome the possible eviction history," says Beyond Shelter's founder, Tanya Tull. "We help them into the housing and we help them furnish it."

Beyond Shelter also provides a case manager for up to a year to help locate jobs, secure child care, enroll children in school and provide counseling.

"What we do," Tull says, "is help them rebuild their lives."

The Multi-Service Center will keep growing to fit the needs of its clientele, Burkhardt says. A pediatrics clinic, for example, is set to come online soon.

"There has been a lot of work and effort that has gone into making these agencies work together," adds Angela Coron, who manages the city's Human and Social Services Bureau.

The Villages at Cabrillo — hailed by city officials as a "model program" — promise to be one of the largest, most comprehensive social-service developments in the country.

Still unfinished, the Villages occupy 26 acres of renovated former Naval housing abutting the Terminal Island (47/103) Freeway to the west.

It's an attractive, well-landscaped haven for homeless shelters, veterans' services, job training, transitional housing and sustance-abuse counseling.

Developed as a public-private partnership between the nonprofit U.S. Veterans Initiative and real-estate developer Cantwell Anderson, the Villages at Cabrillo is home to numerous veterans' services as well as Catholic Charities' family shelter, a Salvation Army shelter and transitional housing for veterans and women.

Mary McLeod Bethune School for homeless children is located at the Villages. And plans are under way for Comprehensive Child Development, a preschool to be funded partially by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, as well as a youth shelter for homeless kids ages 11 to 17.

When finished, the Villages should accommodate about 1,000 people at a cost of up to $40 million.

A walk through the site reveals freshly painted buildings in pretty, pastel hues, a sand pit for volleyball and new picnic tables placed on thick, green grass.

"The goal was to make this feel like a campus," says Peter Postlmayr, project director for Cantwell Anderson. "It is a network of resources, and all those things help the families."

The idea behind the Villages, Postlmayr says, is stair-stepping homeless people from one level to the next. Those who come in may be unemployed, have untreated medical problems or be drug-dependent.

First, they're admitted into a short-term shelter and provided a number of services: job training, medical clinics and Alcoholics Anonymous, to name a few.

Once they get on track and have some type of income, they can graduate into on-site transitional housing. That means they pay rent but still have access to programs and assistance. Once they've mastered transitional housing for a year or two, most people are ready to move into permanent housing.

Stair-stepping, Postlmayr says, softens the blow for people who are still a little shaky on their new legs.

Neither the Multi-Service Center nor the Villages at Cabrillo can do everything for everybody.

Ultimately, only those with willingness and dedication rise from the ranks of the homeless, says Ruth Schwartz, executive director of Shelter Partnership, a Los Angeles-based organization that analyzes public policy on homelessness.

Some are unable or unwilling to make the change. They live week to week, always looking for another friend to double up with, or another 30-day shelter, or another motel room.

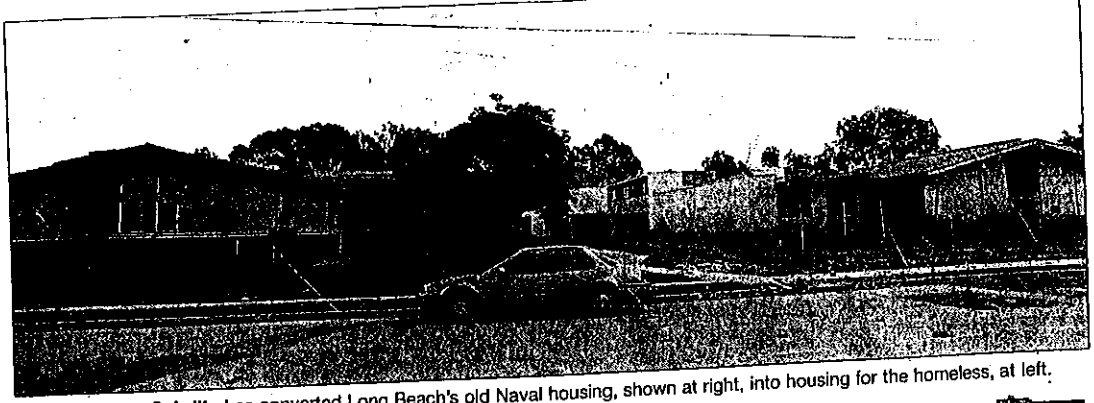
Even those who achieve independence must work hard to stay there. Most continue to live in poverty, at least for the short term. They spread their hourly wages as thinly as possible, then seek welfare, rental assistance or food stamps to supplement their income, Schwartz says.

"Even if they're making $8 an hour, they'll still have to rely on the kindness of strangers."

Relying on the homeless parents in turn are the Kaylas and the Christians and the Julies — the youngest of the homeless, the most vulnerable and helpless.

Through no fault of their own, they follow sadly along, uncertain of their future.

Small, innocent, invisible. The children of the homeless.



The Villages at Cabrillo has converted Long Beach's old Naval housing, shown at right, into housing for the homeless, at left.

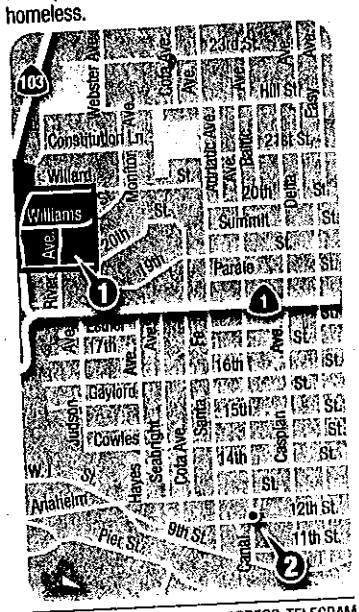
A job center on the campus of the Villages at Cabrillo in Long Beach offers homeless adults access to numerous employment services. From the center, they can make resumes, set up job interviews and educate themselves by using the Internet.

For more info

The Multi-Service Center can be reached at (562) 733-1147. Villages at Cabrillo can be reached at (562) 388-8194. And Beyond Shelter can be reached at (213) 252-0772.

HOMELESS SERVICES

The Villages at Cabrillo (1) and the Long Beach Multi-Service Center (2) both take a comprehensive approach to helping the homeless.



PAUL PENZELLA / PRESS-TELEGRAM

Homeless facts

- As many as 1.2 million children in America—and 9,000 in Los Angeles County — are homeless nightly.
- Fifty percent of homeless women and children are fleeing abuse.
- Children in 40 percent of homeless families have an average of one or more chronic illnesses within a single year.
- Nearly 20 percent of homeless children in some regions of the country lack a regular source of medical care.
- Almost 10 percent of homeless infants and toddlers fail to receive proper preventative care during the first two months of life.
- Seventy-five percent of homeless children worry that they will have no place to live; 87 percent worry something bad will happen to someone in their family.
- Within a single year, 40 percent of homeless kids have attended two different schools, and 28 percent have attended three or more.
- Roughly 23 percent of homeless school-age children are prevented from attending school regularly.
- Problems such as anxiety, depression and withdrawal are exhibited in 12 percent of homeless children between the ages of 3 and 6 and in 47 percent of those ages 6 to 17.
- Homeless children are hungry more than twice as often as other children.
- Almost a quarter of homeless children have witnessed acts of violence within their family.

Source: Better Homes Fund, U.S. Conference of Mayors, National Coalition for the Homeless, Shelter Partnership.

Roy Flores

Jade Newell

Page Flores

Brittany Washington

"Lack of education is the root cause of homelessness."

Homes for the Homeless

Fighting homelessness on many fronts

By Wendy Thomas Russell
Staff writer

Attacking homelessness means isolating its many complicated causes and waging battles on several fronts.

Here are the issues that homeless advocates say are most in need of attention:

1. HOUSING

Ask experts on homelessness for solutions to the problem, and they're apt to focus on one issue: affordable housing.

Not that homes automatically lift families out of poverty or get them off public assistance or secure a certain future.

But they're the first, vital step in doing all three, says Ruth Schwartz, executive director of Shelter Partnership, which analyzes public policy on homelessness.

Stable shelter provides children with the groundwork for a stable life — a must if the cycle of "generational poverty" is to be broken, Schwartz says.

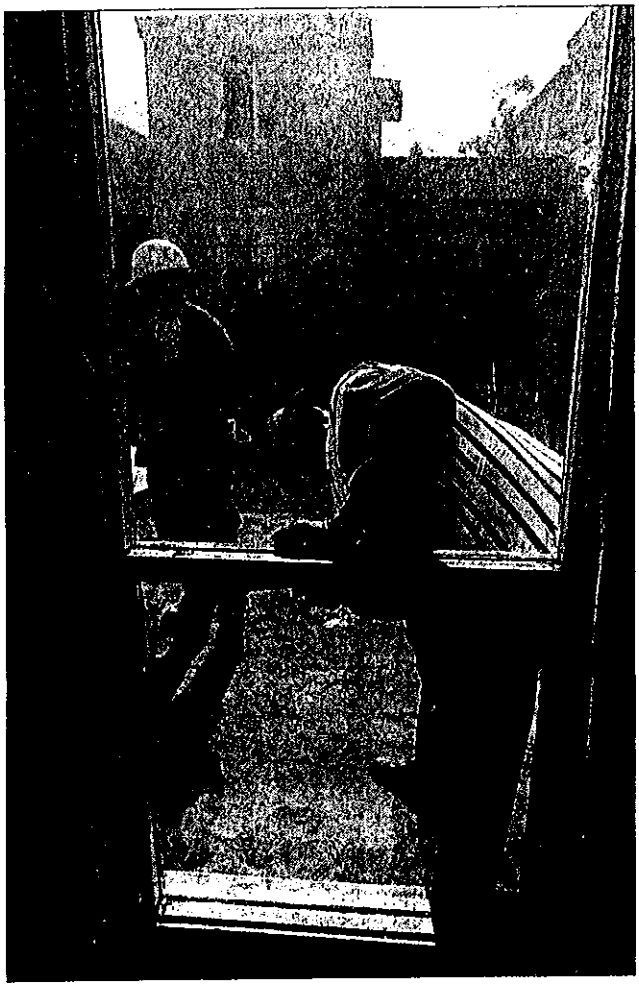
"It's most important to get (families) moved into housing, so they don't disintegrate."

Tanya Tull, who founded Beyond Shelter 12 years ago to provide housing to the homeless, couldn't agree more.

"We are moving families into housing first," Tull says, "then providing all the case management" to help them get jobs, child care, and counseling. Supportive services, she says, are much more effective when families have already found permanent shelter.

"A sense of hope begins to take hold," she adds. "You are dealing with a different person because there finally is hope."

But low-cost housing isn't easy to come by, experts say. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about 3 million poor Americans spent more than 50 percent of their income on rent in 1995. And Tull says finding shelter for her clients can take months.



Jimmy Brown, a veteran who was once homeless, helps renovate a building at the Villages at Cabrillo, a 26-acre campus for homeless services on Long Beach's Westside. Old Naval housing has been redesigned to fit the needs of homeless veterans, families and children at the Villages. It's one local example of how solutions to homelessness are being put to work.

"Twenty years ago, there was a stock of affordable housing," Schwartz says. "Those stocks are disappearing rapidly."

Since 1990, for example, there have been 12,500 housing units demolished in the city of Los Angeles to make way for commercial or luxury housing, says Glenda Low, projects director for Shelter Partnership. (She said she did not know how many low-income units had been created during that time.)

Proposals to create more low-income housing, transitional housing and emergency shelters face several challenges, including lack of space, financial cost and "not-in-my-backyard" attitudes.

Many experts and advocates suggest pumping federal money into housing programs — a big-government answer deeply rooted in political controversy.

Congressional legislation on homelessness tends to be carefully worded.

One bill proposed last year and co-written by Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., aimed to consolidate existing housing programs rather than create new housing, and to "allow flexibility and creativity in rethinking solutions to homelessness."

National agencies, such as Homes for the Homeless and the Better Homes Fund, suggest providing housing assistance — such as a bigger low-income tax credit and a budget boost for Section 8 programs, which provide federal rent subsidies to low-income households through the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

In L.A. County alone, 153,000 residents are on Section 8 waiting lists. In Long Beach, the list is 9,000 names long.

And the wait is daunting.

"We tell people to be prepared (to wait) for five years," says Larry Triesch, of the Long Beach Housing Authority.

In recent years, the city has been trying to foster an economic comeback in downtown Long Beach. Upscale restaurants, retail stores and lofts have taken the spotlight, while low-income housing gets little more than an honorable mention, says Dennis Rockway, of the Legal Aid Foundation of Long Beach.

Rockway is among those who say the city could do more.

The three major developments proposed for downtown — CityPlace, Queensway Bay and The Park at Harbour View — offer commercial and housing components. But none includes low-income housing — a component some cities have come to require in major projects.

Cities "have vacillated between indifference and hostility to affordable housing," Rockway says. "Long Beach over the years has been conspicuous in its lack (of attention to) those kinds of needs."

But Jack Humphrey, the city's advanced planning officer, says providing houses for low-income families has become a priority in the last two years. And, Burkhardt says, the city's annual Continuum of Care report identifies needs specific to the community's homeless population and addresses those needs.

Last year, the federal government awarded $3 million to local agencies based on needs explained in the Continuum of Care.

"I would respectfully disagree with Dennis (Rockway)," Humphrey says. "The city has certainly done everything we could do, given the financial resources and the system that we work within. We certainly would like to do more and we plan to do more."

2. CHILD CARE

While child care may seem a secondary issue, it is anything but for many single parents struggling with poverty.

The difference between low-cost child care and no child care can be the difference between an employed parent and a welfare recipient.

"Millions of parents must choose between seeking employment and caring for their children, resulting in the reliance of many families on the welfare system," says the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, a Washington, D.C.-based organization described as "the legal arm of the national movement to end homelessness."

And child care isn't just a problem for homeless parents. A 1999 report by the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services said 11,000 children of various income levels go without licensed child care in Long Beach.

Fortunately, a free preschool and day-care center for homeless children in Long Beach has offered one solution.

The Play House, which operates on an annual budget of $275,000, provides about two dozen youngsters a day with activities, interaction and one-on-one attention — all deemed essential to the development of children.

Admission is first come, first served, so the Play House often must turn children away, says director Anita Velasquez.

3. JOBS

While unemployment in the United States is at one of its lowest points — 4.2 percent in January versus 9.8 percent in 1993 — the paychecks earned by many of the nation's poor are often too small to keep single-parent families afloat, homeless advocates say.

Paying for child care and rent, they say, can suck every cent from a minimum-wage paycheck, leaving a family constantly at risk of losing stability.

In no state does a minimum wage job cover the cost of a one-bedroom unit at "fair market value," according to a report cited by the National Coalition for the Homeless, a national advocacy network engaging in public education, policy advocacy and grassroots organizing.

Raising the minimum wage is full of political controversy, and some say it would make little difference anyway. But job training and development have become increasingly popular.

Locally, the Long Beach Multi-Service Center and a large social-services center called the Villages at Cabrillo both offer job training and adult education.

Such programs are aimed at preparing homeless parents to enter higher-paying jobs.

4. HEALTH CARE

"Homeless people are twice as likely as the general public to have chronic health problems," writes the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, "but are less likely to have access to adequate health care."

When it comes to children, free or low-cost health care is of primary concern.

A 1999 study by Families USA found that 675,000 people lost health care in 1997 as a result of federal welfare reform — including 400,000 children. Also in 1997, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, about 43.4 million Americans had no health insurance.

These numbers mean that homeless children go without regular checkups and, instead, end up in emergency rooms far more often than other children, says a recent report by the Better Homes Fund, a Massachusetts-based charity devoted to helping homeless families.

Homeless kids, the report says, tend to suffer a range of ailments: twice the ear infections, five times the diarrheal and stomach problems and six times the speech and stammering problems, for example.

Almost 10 percent of homeless infants and toddlers fail to receive proper preventative care during their first two months of life, one-third lack essential immunizations, one-third under the age of 6 have never been screened for lead poisoning, and 70 percent of preschoolers in homeless families have chronic illnesses such as ear infections, asthma, stammering and eczema.

It can be a vicious cycle.

Forty percent of homeless families have a child with at least one chronic illness within a single year. The cost of treating chronic illnesses itself can push a family into homelessness.

In addition to providing low-cost or no-cost clinics, some experts suggest that all children entering shelters be presumptively eligible for Medicaid, that health services be made available at homeless shelters and that more nurses be assigned to schools with high numbers of homeless children.

5. EDUCATION

Despite successful efforts by Congress to open up schools to more homeless children, an estimated 24 percent of homeless youngsters still aren't getting a regular education, according to the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. They don't have adequate transportation, or proper school records, or enough supplies, or the outside support they need to succeed, the organization says.

And the New York-based Homes for the Homeless says: "Lack of education is the root cause of homelessness."

For homeless children, staying in school becomes central to breaking the cycle of generational poverty.

Homeless children are nine times more likely than other children to repeat a grade, four times more likely to drop out of school and three times more likely to be placed in special education programs.

In an attempt to keep transient children in school, Long Beach's Mary McLeod Bethune School educates homeless children on a short-term basis. They don't need to properly enroll, nor do they need to come to school regularly.

By catering to homeless youth, Bethune creates a safe, comfortable and easily accessible place for kids to learn.

If homeless children are to attend regular public schools — which most do — educating teachers about their special needs is mandatory, homeless advocates say.

6. SUPPORT SERVICES

Tackling homelessness also means tackling its many root causes: substance abuse, domestic violence, mental illness, teen pregnancy.

Domestic violence, for example, is the leading cause of homelessness among women and children, according to the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Victim's Housing Act, a Congressional bill proposed last year.

"Of all homeless women and children," writes Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill.., "50 percent are fleeing domestic violence."

The bill, HR 1352, is aimed at reducing the number of abused women who return to their abusers by allotting federal funds — $50 million in the first year — to emergency shelters, housing programs and other supportive services.

In addition, 25 to 40 percent of the homeless need help recovering from drug and alcohol dependence, up to 30 percent require treatment for mental illness and an unknown number need legal assistance to escape abuse within their households, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, a national federation of organizations that advances community-based solutions to homelessness.

Government subsidies are also cited as mandatory cushions for families with children. Without them, experts say, some don't stand a chance.

Among the most valued federal subsidies are the Women, Infants and Children program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, food stamps and child nutrition programs.

7. PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

When talking about homelessness, the concept of government subsidies tends to overshadow that of personal responsibility. But the role of individuals in keeping their children in stable housing must be mentioned, too.

The vast majority of homeless children are headed by single-woman households — a statistic that points to a breakdown of parental responsibility and lack of child-support payments.

And when a parent isn't willing to do the work required to get off the streets, then no amount of aid will compensate.