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Park Ridge to join PADS network of shelters

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By JENNIFER JOHNSON

St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Park Ridge will open its doors to the area's homeless when it becomes part of a network of suburban shelters later this year.

The church, located at 306 S. Prospect Ave., has been designated as a PADS (Public Action to Deliver Shelter) site. Beginning in October, it will serve as a nightly shelter once a week between the hours of 6:45 p.m. and 7 a.m. The exact day of the week it will be open has not been finalized.

St. Mary's was chosen in part because of its close proximity to public transportation, said the Rev. Amity Carrubba, church representative. Letters were recently sent to residents living near the church on Prospect, Fairview and Courtland Avenues, letting them know about the shelter, and Carrubba said an informational meeting with the community will likely be held as well.

Bringing a PADS site to Park Ridge was the work of the Park Ridge Ministerial Association, a group of local church leaders who wanted to provide a way to better help the homeless who have sought assistance.

"All of us in Park Ridge have people coming to our doors," said the Rev. Stephen Larson of St. Luke's Lutheran Church. Some come seeking food or money for gasoline; others need a place to stay for the night, he said. The churches set aside money in their budgets for such purposes, including helping someone get a motel room for the night.

"The needs are out there," agreed the Rev. James McCracken of Park Ridge Presbyterian Church.

Currently, church leaders refer many of the area's homeless to Journeys From PADS to HOPE, the umbrella organization that works to help people transition out of homelessness. Once the shelters close on April 30 each year, requests for help increase at Park Ridge churches, said the Rev. Kristi Weber of St. Luke's Lutheran Church.

"The number of people who come and ask for assistance after the PADS shelters close is heartbreaking," she said, adding that many of the homeless pitch tents in the forest preserves when they have nowhere else to go.

PADS currently operates 18 nightly shelters at churches in 10 northwest suburban communities. Because no PADS sites exist in the communities between Des Plaines and Evanston, members of the Park Ridge Ministerial Association discussed the topic of bringing one to Park Ridge to fill in the gap. In fall of 2006, they discussed the idea with Mayor Howard Frimark who said he would welcome a proposal.

Frimark said he is waiting to see final plans from the Ministerial Association.

"If this thing is going to work -- as it has in other communities -- all of us have to work together on it," he said.

Carrubba said the city has been invited to work in partnership with the Ministerial Association on the PADS project.

The Park Ridge shelter will be housed in a lower level gathering room at St. Mary's Episcopal Church where there is access to a kitchen and restroom, Carrubba said. Guests will enter and exit through the Crescent Avenue entrance. Carrubba does not anticipate more than a dozen guests staying at the church at one time, and the exact capacity will be determined by the fire department.

The shelter will be staffed by volunteers who will check in guests, prepare meals for them, and provide supervision through the night.

Individuals must register in order to stay at a PADS site, and they must pass a background check. Guests must also adhere to a number of rules or they risk being banned from the PADS program. Guests cannot be disruptive or intoxicated, and they cannot loiter around the site before it opens or after it closes in the morning,

To prepare for opening the shelter at St. Mary's Episcopal Church, a group interested in becoming volunteers has been working at the PADS site at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Des Plaines.

"We have a lot of people getting on-the-job training this year," Weber said.

Anyone interested in volunteering at the St. Mary's Episcopal Church PADS site when it opens in October is asked to contact Pastor David Jungnickel at First United Methodist Church, at (847) 825-3144.

The Park Ridge Ministerial Association is also relying on donations from members of their congregations and the community in order to provide the basic necessities for the shelter. Anyone interested in making a donation should also contact Pastor Jungnickel.

Each church will also seek volunteers from within the congregation.

"It's not the ministry of one parish," Carrubba said of the Park Ridge PADS project. "It's the ministry of all the congregations in Park Ridge."

Carrie Davis, acting director of community development for the city of Park Ridge, said it is likely St. Mary's Episcopal will need approval from the City Council in order to open the shelter, but she was still researching the matter as the city has never had a request to open a part-time shelter. Davis added that no representatives from St. Mary's or the Park Ridge Ministerial Association have yet approached city staff with the proposal.

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