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The new faces of homelessness

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WARREN - Imagine the uneasy feeling that washed over Talana Williams when a utility worker arrived to shut off the gas and electric service to her home last July.

Williams, who paid \$500 a month to live in the three-bedroom home on Detroit's east side with her two children, had been told the utilities were included in the cost of her rent. That would have worked well for her while she attempted to pay down a large past-due utility balance from another address.

But it didn't work out at all. The utilities were illegally hooked up, and as it turned out, the man she'd been paying to live in the home didn't even own the property.

"I could live there now. I never got put out," said Williams, 40, who had been on medical leave from her job in hotel security when the house went dark. "I still could have stayed there if my lights or gas weren't turned off."

Williams and her children did stay in the home for a while. She said they used candles for light, and either cooked outside or ate with family members.

When the temperatures dipped in November, they left to stay with family.

On Dec. 14, Williams, her 2-year-old daughter Kamora, and her 12-year-old son Jaylene, became homeless.

Their story is but one that illustrates a trend, according to Misty Authier, shelter director at the Salvation Army's **Macomb's Answer To Temporary Shelter** facility in Warren.

"Our homeless, it's not the substance abuse that it used to be.

It's the neighbor that you don't see on your street. It's a co-worker. It's the kids that are at school with your children," Authier said.

The Salvation Army's 50-bed MATTS shelter is one of the few licensed and available to mothers with children, in part because of its strict policies prohibiting alcohol and drug use.

MATTS residents are subjected to daily breath tests and random drug screenings.

Authier said shelter residents typically meet with a case manager at least once a week to address their specific situation, or "barriers," including past-due bills, that could preclude them from finding housing.

Residents at MATTS and MCREST, the **Macomb County** Emergency Rotating Shelter, hosted by member churches, must have some ties to the **county**: a prior residence or a job. Authier said residents are permitted to stay at MATTS for up to 30 days each year.

"And 30 days goes very fast, especially if you're a first-time homeless (person)," Authier said.

"It's hard to get help in 30 days." For accommodation, many shelter residents move between locations, if available, until the limits of their stays are reached or until they find housing.

The **county's** shelters also offer an array of support functions, ranging from meals to referrals for services that homeless individuals and families need.

The **Macomb County Warming Center** operates a rotating nighttime shelter for adults

only.

They also provide services, including help with obtaining state-issued identification and a physical mailing address to receive documents - through the Ray of Home Day **Center** in Eastpointe.

Kathleen McKinley-Goodrich, the **center's** executive director, said many of those needing help these days are everyday people who are just having trouble making it.

"We do get a lot of people stopping by from the neighborhood who are barely housed, in danger of eviction," McKinley-Goodrich said.

"We see that two or three times a day." There are some success stories, and signs that things may be improving.

McKinley-Goodrich said just last week the **center's** staff heard from a client who had been out of work for some time, but was able to land a job at a tool-and-die shop, working in his old profession.

But in other cases the needs remain dire.

She said another client with a list of medical problems is also dealing with his wife's serious illness.

The man's wife had a high-paying medical job but developed a brain injury. Add to that the fact that they've lost a son and have another with a health problem.

"This family is struggling, trying to work, and trying to do things. They just can't make it," McKinley-Goodrich said. "We were able to get their water turned back on. "It seems like any way they go, it's just very rough. These are people who have worked all their lives." They're people like Williams, who reflected on her situation with admirable optimism last week as her daughter played in a room reserved for families with children inside of the MATTS shelter. While her situation is a source of stress for the family, Williams said she'd stay focused on her children, her faith in the Lord, and her plan.

"My plan is, I am here in the shelter for a purpose," Williams said. "Right now, I want to find my place first, and then get a job." For more information about the Salvation Army's MATTS Shelter, call (586) 754-7400.

For more information about the **Macomb County Warming Center** and the Ray of Hope Day **Center**, call (586) 321-0998.