New York City Reaches Out to Homeless People Who Are Wary of Traditional Shelters

By WINNIE HU    FEB. 8, 2015

The last people to leave Riverside Church at midnight were always the homeless men and women who sat for hours on wooden pews in the hallway to escape the frigid air. They were also the first to return at 6 a.m. when the doors reopened.

So the church, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, converted part of its gym into a refuge for those who had nowhere else to go, as part of a New York City-financed expansion of housing for homeless people. Beginning last month, the 10 folding beds with pillows and blankets have filled nightly with regulars like Andre Fields, 55, who used to ride the bus to La Guardia Airport to sleep in the terminal waiting areas. “I can go get in my bed now,” said Mr. Fields, who has been homeless since 2012. “I couldn’t say that before.”

Mr. Fields has been among those known as the “unsheltered homeless,” a relatively small subset of New York City’s homeless population, but a segment often deemed most at risk of serious injury. Although the numbers of unsheltered homeless people can be hard to estimate, homeless advocates say their population is increasing. While city officials maintain that the number has remained relatively stable for the past few years — hovering at just over 3,000 — the city’s Department of Homeless Services will devote more resources to unsheltered homeless people this year, allocating more than $45 million in city and state funds, up from $35.5 million the year before.

The homeless population in the city’s traditional shelters has risen overall, to 58,500 this month, from 52,144 a year ago, according to city data. Though New York City once turned away homeless adults when shelters were full in the 1970s, since 1981 it has had a “right-to-shelter mandate” that requires it to provide temporary emergency shelter at any time to any person who requests it. There are currently 255
shelters, 24 of which were opened last year to accommodate demand.

It is more difficult to estimate the number of unsheltered homeless people because of their transience. Last year, based on an annual citywide one-night count by volunteers, there were an estimated 3,357, a slight increase from 3,180 the year before, but still lower than the 4,395 in 2005, the first year of the count. This year’s count is planned for Monday.

Some advocates say they are also seeing a more diverse group of homeless people on the streets — teenagers, young men and women, even couples with dogs — whereas in the past, a majority of them were typically older men. “Not everyone recovered after the recession — many have not — and it’s still very difficult,” said Cassandra L. Agredo, executive director of the Xavier Mission in Chelsea.

Last month, the city opened the first transitional housing since 2010 intended specifically for unsheltered homeless people. Called a “safe haven” instead of a shelter, the 125-bed program in the Bronx has fewer restrictions, including no curfew, to appeal to those who do not like shelters. It also offers showers, meals and social services, including counseling. There are nine other safe havens in the city — including two others in the Bronx and four in Manhattan, two in Brooklyn and one on Staten Island — with an additional 542 beds, for a total of 667 beds this year.

“This is a very specific segment of the homeless population,” said Lilliam Barrios-Paoli, the deputy mayor for health and human services. “They’re in great need for services, and we need particular strategies to help them and get them out of the streets. Normally, they will not accept service unless it’s on their own terms.”

Many are single or estranged from family members and friends, and often have drug and alcohol addictions and mental health problems. They avoid the city’s traditional homeless shelters and instead take up residence below scaffolding, on subway platforms, or in any number of corners of the city to wait out freezing weather.

“The large majority of homeless New Yorkers sleeping on the streets are living with mental illness and other disabilities, and their numbers are on the rise,” said Patrick Markee, deputy executive director for advocacy for the Coalition for the Homeless.

In the Bronx, outreach workers who know the regulars from their rounds have reported seeing a couple of dozen new faces this winter as well as larger encampments under bridges and near highway ramps. Every year since 2012...
Midtown Manhattan, more homeless people have congregated late at night in pedestrian areas and public spaces, especially in warmer months, said Dan Biederman, president of the 34th Street Partnership, which manages the neighborhood.

Efforts to help homeless people underscore the scope of the problem. The new safe haven center in the Bronx is run by BronxWorks, a social services agency that also runs a 50-bed safe haven and adjoining drop-in center that has been packed every night. Scott Auwarter, BronxWorks’s assistant executive director, said that so many homeless people need a safe, warm place at night that they even curl up in chairs at the drop-in center, which has no beds but is open all the time. About 100 people a night are staying at the drop-in center, up from 60 a year ago, he said.

The city’s Department of Homeless Services plans to extend hours at more drop-in shelters. It has also expanded a network of beds in churches and community buildings that serves as an alternative to the traditional shelter system, and allows homeless people to remain in the neighborhoods where they feel most at home. This winter, the department has added 30 beds for a total of 300 around the city.

In addition, the department has increased the number of outreach workers who check on unsheltered homeless people to try to bring them in from the cold. Since July, it has extended its patrols to the subway system, which was previously monitored by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and sent 280 people to safe havens and other places.

In Greenpoint, Brooklyn, the Lutheran Church of the Messiah teamed up with a community group, Common Ground, to start an overnight respite program last month for up to 10 homeless men in its fellowship hall. The church’s pastor, the Rev. Amy Kienzle, said she saw it as an extension of the church’s mission to serve the neighborhood. Many homeless people, some of whom speak only Polish, gather daily on park benches across from the church; one man slept in the church garden in December near a heat grate.

Some local residents have opposed the respite program, citing concerns for the safety of neighborhood children, among other things. But City Councilman Stephen Levin, who represents the area, said that steps had to be taken to help several dozen homeless people who live in Greenpoint, some of whom have died from exposure in recent years. “Having a respite program in this neighborhood will save lives,” he said.
Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen in Chelsea, which primarily serves homeless people, will expand a personal hygiene program this month that dispensed 38,000 free toiletry items — soap, toothpaste, razors — in 2014, up from 10,000 items in 2012.

At Riverside Church on a recent morning, homeless people passed through the doors of a soaring, Gothic-style building that has welcomed world leaders including Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela and Bill Clinton. Church workers greeted the homeless people by name as they helped themselves to free coffee and cocoa, or waited for showers.

The Rev. Debra P. Northern, the church’s director of social services, said that while the church already provided a food pantry, clothing and even haircuts, its leaders decided to do more for the growing number of people showing up at its doors. The overnight program is being run with a nonprofit group, Goddard Riverside Community Center. “If they have some place to rest their heads, it’s a first step in beginning to reclaim other aspects of their lives,” she said.

Mr. Fields came to the church in 2012 for a shower after he was evicted from his one-bedroom apartment in northern Manhattan because he could not keep up with the $732 monthly rent. Mr. Fields, who has worked seasonal park maintenance jobs, soon made himself at home at the church, helping out by washing towels and stocking the pantry. At night, he would sleep at the airport or around public libraries, and in the summer, on benches next to Grant’s Tomb.

Mr. Fields said that he never wanted to go to a shelter because he feared he would feel confined and uncomfortable among strangers. But since the church gym opened at night, he has not slept anywhere else.

“I know everybody and it’s quiet,” he said. “I feel safe.”

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