

Pontiac, Michigan police raid homeless shelter

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30 January 2001

On January 23, police in Pontiac, Michigan carried out a pre-dawn raid on a homeless shelter. Police arrested 32 people with outstanding misdemeanor warrants at the Grace Center of Hope shelter, formerly known as the Pontiac Rescue Mission. The shelter is located in the heart of the city's downtown area.

Once the home of one of General Motors' most successful and profitable divisions, after two decades of plant closings and mass layoffs Pontiac has become synonymous with poverty and decay. City officials have made an attempt to revitalize the downtown area, but so far development has been limited to a few art galleries, restaurants and entertainment establishments within a few blocks. The Grace Center of Hope shelter is located within view of this area.

In an ongoing attempt to smear the center as disreputable, Pontiac Chief of Police Larry Miracle and Mayor Walter Moore, a Democrat, launched the early morning raid January 23 based on the spurious claim that the shelter was harboring a rapist, drug dealers and felons, none of whom were found. "It's harassment," said mission director Reverend Kent Clark. "We have been attempting to put mothers and daughters in a church building a couple of blocks away. We purchased the building but the [Pontiac] Planning and Zoning Board has turned us down. Just recently, in December, they turned us down for the third time."

The city's Planning and Zoning department, of which the mayor is a member, has opposed the expansion because it would be "injurious to business." The mayor and city officials have charged the mission and other charities in the downtown area with establishing "half-way houses and three-quarter houses" in the downtown area, cutting across their plans to weed out the poor and attract businesses.

On January 23 at 5:04 a.m. the 150 residents sleeping in the center, including children, were forced out of bed and told to line up. The police checked their names and

Social Security numbers against a list provided a week earlier by the center. Thirty-two people were arrested on outstanding warrants, all of them misdemeanors, except one felony charge against a man wanted for stealing a car in nearby Ann Arbor. The other charges ranged from unpaid traffic tickets to disorderly conduct.

The charges were too minor to prompt the Detroit Police Department to drive the 20 miles to pick up the supposed suspects. Instead, the Pontiac police loaded the shelter residents into two vans and drove them to Detroit's downtown police headquarters to be booked.

Rev. Clark stated that 15 residents were loaded into a paddy wagon, handcuffed and hooked together, but were not charged or read their rights. When they arrived in Detroit, Clark said, the shelter residents were left at the station.

Craig Rubin, one of those arrested, said the Detroit police did not want them. "We never even made it inside the Detroit police station," said Rubin. "They let us out in the middle of [the street]." Rubin said that he and the others walked several blocks to the courthouse to set dates for their outstanding tickets.

Another shelter resident, Renada Tate, 39, who is recovering from drug addiction, said she was forced to leave her children behind when she was taken away from the shelter. Renada said the Pontiac police dropped them off in downtown Detroit but they had no money to get back to Pontiac. A bus driver traveling to Pontiac from Detroit was compassionate enough to give all of them rides back to the shelter.

Typical of some of the "crimes" committed by shelter residents was the case of Craig Fox, a recovering drug abuser who has been at the center for six months. Fox was taken to Ann Arbor on the outstanding charge of catching an undersized fish, a 12-inch walleye, when the regulations stipulate they must be at least 15 inches long.

The Grace Center of Hope houses the homeless on a

30-day emergency basis, but it also has a year-long drug rehabilitation center that it has wanted to expand to house women. Downtown Pontiac is also the home of two other shelters—HAVEN, a domestic violence shelter primarily for women, and Lighthouse of Oakland County, a nonprofit agency that provides transitional housing and emergency services for low-income city residents.

Shelter director Kent Clark said there was no reason to raid the center. He said the shelter has a policy of fully cooperating with the police and is not a haven for criminals. Clark and his daughter and assistant, Shannon Grace Clark, said that although the police had no warrant, they let them in because they have a policy of cooperating with the police.

In an attempt to justify the raid, police claimed they had information a rapist was at the center and that an undercover officer had made drug purchases at the facility within the past month. Clark and his daughter insisted that drug sales were not taking place at the center. Shannon Clark said, “The people here are padded down the moment they walk through those doors. There are random drug tests. There's no way they could get any drugs in here.”

“I am in a state of shock,” continued Rev. Clark. “I asked, why would you do this? The doors are open. The police come through here all of the time, at their leisure. We give them all kinds of information about the people who live here. You don't have to raid at 5 a.m.”

Rev. Clark said they are in the process of taking their case to the City Council, but if the council refuses to hear it they are prepared to go to court.

The raid on the shelter is characteristic of the impact the decline in the auto industry has had auto-dominated cities such as Pontiac. Like many industrial cities after the Second World War when the US dominated industrial production, especially in automobiles, the area was once vibrant and prosperous. General Motors' Pontiac car division was headquartered here, but is now only a skeleton of what it once was. During the past 15 years GM has axed almost 13,000 jobs in Pontiac, closing three of the five plants it had operated.

The poverty rate in the city is staggering. Out of a population of 71,174, more than 4 of 10, or 43 percent of residents live below the government's official poverty line of \$17,400 for a family of four. In the

downtown area conditions are even worse, with more than 64 percent living below poverty level. Rev. Clark said that demands on his shelter have steadily increased in recent years. In 1998 the center served 90,000 meals and by 2000 they were serving 106,786 meals.



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