

Pontiac, Michigan shelter to close emergency center

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As of March 1, Grace Centers of Hope, formerly known as the Pontiac Rescue Mission, will close its 30-day emergency center that regularly houses 70 to 100 homeless people. The decision to close the center in Pontiac, Michigan, north of Detroit, follows a January 23 predawn raid on the shelter and a surprise inspection by the city's fire marshal one week later.

Grace Centers Director Reverend Kent Clark said the raid and inspections were part of a "smear campaign" by Democratic Mayor Walter Moore and city officials to prevent the center from opening a nearby building they purchased that would be used to house a program for drug-addicted women and their children. The Planning and Zoning Commission, of which the mayor is a member, rejected their request three times, charging that residents loiter and would be "injurious to business." Mayor Moore chaired the last meeting rejecting the request, held in December.

At a rally in front of the Pontiac police headquarters to protest the raids, Reverend Clark said they had decided to close the 30-day emergency center because of the criticism of city officials and businesses in downtown Pontiac. Clark told the press, "We can't handle the problem with the police on our back and businesses on our back too." In a news release issued by Grace Centers of Hope, the raid was cited as the main reason for closing the center: "The commitment to close the program has been underscored by the criticism and pressure from local city officials and a politically motivated police raid on January 23 and a fire safety inspection on January 31."

The shelter has become a source of conflict with city officials, who want to remove the homeless from the streets of the downtown area in an attempt to revitalize the city. Once prosperous and home to one of General Motors' most profitable divisions, the Pontiac model, since the early 1980s the city has been hard hit by layoffs in the auto industry that destroyed over 500,000 jobs nationally.

Pontiac, a city of 71,000, has one of the highest poverty rates in the state. In the city's center, 43 percent earn below the poverty level, or \$17,400 for a family of four. But Pontiac is located in Oakland County, one of the fastest growing and most affluent counties in the US. One mile from Pontiac is Bloomfield Hills, the residential neighborhood of executives in the Big Three auto industry, where the median household income was \$152,320 in 1995.

On January 23 the center was raided by a special SWAT-type police squad at 5 a.m. on the false claim that the center was

harboring a rapist, drug dealers and felons. The police came in without a warrant, lined up all 150 people in the shelter, and arrested 32 people, including four women who had to leave behind seven children. The charges were so minor that 28 of the residents were not charged, fingerprinted or booked by area police departments—a standard procedure for anyone charged with a crime. All except one faced misdemeanor charges, including one person ticketed for catching an oversized fish.

Four of the residents arrested that morning have now filed suit against the city of Pontiac, including Police Chief Larry Miracle. The suit charges that the police used excessive force in committing the arrests and placed handcuffs on the six-year-old child of Betty Conyers after her arrest. Both Conyers and her son are parties to the suit, as well as Arthur Haggerty and Michael Kotz.

A little more than one week following the raid, Pontiac Fire Chief Jeffrey Hawkins and Buildings Department official Tom McIntyre searched the shelter for fire hazards. Hawkins denied the inspection was harassment and justified the investigation as a routine check after receiving complaints about the building. The fire chief said that while building inspections by his department are supposed to take place each year, the shelter had not been inspected in five or six years.

Kip Diotte, director of the Michigan Coalition for the Homeless, commented on the raid: "The pastor is simply asking for a building for the homeless. He said to the city, if not this building then give us another building."

"Now a level of harassment has escalated that is very obvious," Diotte continued. "It's just appalling. They sent in a fire inspection team shortly after the raid and they tipped off the media before they did it. It's hard to believe, but they actually called the media to tell them they were going to the center. And, of course, they found nothing there. It was done to run those people out of town."

The Michigan homeless organization said their surveys revealed the homeless population to have grown 8 to 10 percent every year over the past eight years. "We have 5,400 emergency and transitional beds in the state," said Diotte. "They are at full capacity all the time. People have to wait in line to get into the program."

Monica Duncan, director of the South Oakland Shelter in Royal Oak, Michigan, reiterated Diotte's concerns. "The needs are very great," said Duncan. "We are all scrambling to try to figure out what we can do to fill the gap [caused by the closure of the shelter]."

Ms. Duncan said the South Oakland Shelter works as part of a group of centers that provide a place for people to stay, but that her center only provides 30 beds. “We work with a number of other churches and synagogues to provide a place for people to stay, but we don't know how we are going to place those people not served by the Pontiac Mission since they provide for so many people.”

Duncan said while they try to provide for as many as possible, they are forced to turn people away every day because they just don't have enough space. Last year they served 2,000 people and their records show 165 people were turned away.

Reverend George Covintree of the Baldwin Church in Pontiac was also upset at the announced closing of the 30-day center. “We have a warming center. If they close—and in my opinion that is an ‘if’—it will mean 100 less beds in the community to serve the homeless. And the problem is there are not another 100 beds in any other agency,” Covintree said. “If it closes, or they decide to close the overnight center, we will see an additional number of people without meals or a place to stay. We don't have the beds for 75 to 100 people.”

Reverend Covintree said one-third of the people who come to his center are the working poor, people who go to work during the day but cannot afford housing and come back to sleep at the center at night. He said he has seen a big increase of people living in the streets since the closure of psychiatric facilities such as the Clinton Valley Mental Health Center. “I call them the walking wounded,” said Covintree. He said a lot of people were also on the government's General Assistance program, a provision that gave an income to single men or women out of work. “Now, those programs are no longer around,” he said.

The Baldwin Center provides a place for 45 to 50 people to sleep on the floor at night, not beds. Like several area churches, they provide a warm place for people in the winter months between December and April. While they have handled as many as 65 people at one time, they are not equipped like the Grace Center to provide meals, beds and a place for families.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several people at the Grace Centers about their experiences and the impact the closure of the shelter will have on their lives and others in Pontiac.

Marell Richardson, 52, was homeless before she came to Grace Centers. She said the 30-day program was vital because she needed a residence in order to get a state ID card and an address to give employers when she applied for a job. “You can't do anything without having an address,” said Richardson. “You can't even apply for a temporary Social Security number without an address. You can't even apply for a temporary job without an address.”

Richardson said the issue of homelessness is a serious problem in the area because of the level of poverty. There are an estimated 800 homeless people in Oakland County, according to an estimate by the Michigan Coalition for the Homeless, but the real number could very well be higher. “People have come in here whose roofs have literally caved in,” she said. “They had nowhere else to go. We have had people come in here who were living in their cars. We have police officers who bring in women and children, or women because they didn't want to put them in jail, but they wanted to get them off the streets. It was either jail or sleeping in the streets.”

Richardson, who now works in the center, said one of the biggest problems facing the homeless is affordable housing: “Being able to have the funds just to move in is a struggle.” She said the rent can be affordable, but you also need money for the security deposit, which includes the first and last month's rent, in addition to the deposits for utilities. “You can't live in a house unless you have heat, water and electricity. It takes \$2,000 to \$3,000 just to move into a place.”

She continued, “We have girls come in who are 16 or 17 years old with babies on their hips, who got kicked out of the house by Mom and Dad or whomever they were living with. They are too young to get an apartment but they have a child to take care of. We consider them ‘emancipated teenagers’ and we help them get state ID and Social Security cards. We help them go to state Social Services offices to help them get an income so they can start being responsible for their own actions and then get their own place.”

Richardson was at the center when it was raided by the police. She said the raid still causes problems for the six-year-old boy whose mother was arrested. “The child was terrorized, he still is. He sees a police officer and he jumps back behind momma. I tried to tell him these are not the same officers who did this, and he kind of looks at the officer and realizes he is not dressed the same way. When they came in at 5 a.m. there were no IDs, no name-tags. They were all dressed in SWAT-team clothing—the black uniform, the big heavy bullet-proof vest, the laced-up boots and the strapped-down guns. I looked at them and thought: Are you coming to raid a maximum-security prison?”

Rokola Glascock said the center is one of the few places that tries to help keep families together: “This is my second time being here. After I left I got married and bought a home, but it proved to be too expensive. My husband is staying here but he is working. Next week I'll be able to work. This has really helped me, I didn't have anywhere else to go.”

The *WSWS* spoke to Katie Goodale who was at the center with her children. Katie is in charge of the daycare center and said they have an average of 25 kids each day at the center. “It will be very difficult for people if they close the emergency center. I know that we are always full. Once one family moves out there are always others filling in. We never seem to be without people coming in here. That should tell you something about the need.”

Goodale said she was surprised to find that more people came there in the summer than in the winter. “One reason is women who are in abusive situations leave in the summer because they feel that even if they have to sleep outside at least they won't freeze to death. Most of the people who come here are working, but they can't live on the wages that they are making.”



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