

Danville News column
Robert John Andrews
“Where Will They Go?”
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On the hide of the weakest we're learning the price of lacking a place to house the homeless or ill-housed. Typical is the phone call I received two months ago. It came from a young man from Washingtonville desperately hoping his family could get into the Gate House. He, wife, and two little girls were going to be evicted in a few weeks. He'd been laid off for months, but he finally landed two job interviews. He was hopeful. Since the Gate House was unable to receive new clients, I had to tell him there was nothing I could do. Maybe we could talk about help with rent. The next week he told me their landlord accelerated their eviction. They sold all they owned, buckled their kids in the back seat, and headed to another state to find work and stay with friends.

Nothing is what others have been telling the increasing number of local residents who are losing their homes. Agape, a new ministry in Bloomsburg, has turned away three families a week. Veterans live under bridges in Columbia County. The Gate House, on sabbatical so they can fix their finances and insure staff supervision, has refused 17 families and 32 individuals since July. In one week, Red Cross fielded several folks searching for shelter, including one couple living in their car. One fellow needed to stay here for three days until his hearing. If he missed the hearing, he'd break parole and go to jail. Which do you think is cheaper for the county? He said he didn't want to miss his hearing. The community should note that when strangers traveling through town knock on church doors soliciting food, shelter, gas money, or bus ticket, we refer them to the local police. The police manage our ministerium's itinerant fund. They run background checks and decide how best to help them on their journey.

The Gate House is a non-profit mission center located on the State Hospital grounds. It was created over ten years ago by a coalition of churches, social service agencies, business leaders, and government officials wanting to provide shelter for our homeless and ill housed neighbors. With a capacity of 41, the Gate House serves residents of Columbia and Montour counties, those who have been living here for 90 days or more, those willing to abide by the rules, do their chores, and get their financial feet back on firm ground.

Why are these folks in need of safe housing? Poverty results from a messy mix of reasons, from personal failure to unfortunate external circumstances: sickness, eviction, unemployment, indebtedness, landlord sold property or is himself broke, foreclosure, boyfriend kicks her out, divorce, lack of family.

You cannot show up at the Gate House and expect admission. You must be referred. Who refers? Human Services, Churches, Police Departments, County Assistance Offices, Geisinger Medical Center (10%), Bloomsburg Hospital (10%), District Justices, Sheriffs, Probation and Parole Officers, Red Cross, Salvation Army.

Who uses the Gate House? 12% have been senior citizens with no place else to go. 30% of the clients are employed, 40% are looking for work, 30% are disabled. Job searches are required for the able-bodied. Over a ten year stretch, 1,059 persons have benefited from the Gate House – wholesome food, clean sheets, the chance to save money, connected with the right social services -- 233 of whom have been children. That's ten elementary school classrooms. Stability from attending school and by staying with their parents is vital for our children's health.

Some fear the Gate House is a magnet for drug users. You want to look for druggies? Look instead to Whisper Hill, Memorial Park, or Mill Street. My sources tell me there is a healthy relationship between the Gate House and police and probation. Gate House administers drug tests to those who are referred along with Criminal Background checks. Those who fail the drug tests or whose criminal background involves violence, recent charges, drug arrests, or are a danger to children are denied.

Where the Gate House got itself into trouble was in becoming dependent upon a singular funding stream and failing to predict the collapse of this fund. The Board is working hard on reforming itself so it doesn't get caught like this again. The Gate House is too valuable a ministry. Too many of our vulnerable residents need the chance and choice to rebuild their lives. Our counties benefit from the accountability it gives. Without the Gate House, where will our neighbors go?