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WEST TEXAS: Episcopalians join massive effort to help the homeless in San Antonio

By Mike Patterson, July 26, 2010

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[Episcopal News Service] Episcopalians are joining the effort to help the homeless at the innovative and newly opened [Haven for Hope](#) facility in San Antonio, Texas.

Spread among 15 buildings over 37 acres, Haven for Hope is the nation's largest homeless center. A private non-profit, its goal is to help transform the lives of men, women and children in the San Antonio and Bexar County area by addressing the root causes of homelessness.

Volunteers from churches in the [Diocese of West Texas](#) are among those on the campus.

The immediate challenge is working out the details of how to manage the massive food and shelter operation and coordinating 78 non-profit, faith-based and government partner agencies.

"We're still in the formulative stage," explained Pat Bridwell, co-chair of the "kitchen corps" at [St. Mark's Episcopal Church](#) in San Antonio. "Everybody has quite a learning curve on this."

Teams of kitchen corps volunteers at St. Mark's prepare hot dishes at the church. The food is then delivered to Haven for Hope and stored in freezers until needed.

Eventually, Haven for Hope will average 1,600 residents on any given night. At three meals a day, that means 4,800 daily meals must be supplied by St. Mark's and other organizations.

In addition, parishioners distribute sack lunches in Haven for Hope's courtyard and hand out mail and clothing, said Bridwell, whose husband is the Rev. Dr. John Lewis, an assisting priest at St. Mark's.

Members of the diocesan staff also are among those volunteering at Haven for Hope. The staff of 20 has broken into two teams. One team serves lunch there the third Tuesday of each month in lieu of their regular staff meeting.

The \$100 million center assembles at one location educational programs, job training and placement, and health services. The center also includes a \$6.1 million restoration center to offer detoxification and counseling to substance abusers and the mentally ill as well as medical, dental and vision clinics.

To create Haven for Hope, planners visited more than 200 shelter operations in a dozen states. The result was the "one-stop" concept to meet a variety of needs for the homeless.

Although San Antonio had offered these services, they were spread across the city. Accessibility was an issue for those lacking the means for basic transportation. Another issue was that obtaining one service often required another service, such as getting proper identification to take advantage of job placement opportunities. This often prevented the homeless from obtaining the services they needed.

Assembling these services on one campus makes them a more accessible, efficient and effective way to help the homeless transform their lives and eventually become self-sufficient individuals on a long-term basis.

One of the first service organizations to relocate to the Haven for Hope campus was the San Antonio Christian Dental Clinic, Inc. The clinic's executive director is David A. Phipps, who is also senior warden at St. Mark's.

Founded in the mid-1980s, the clinic provides free dental care to patients qualifying for financial hardships. Utilizing the volunteer services of about 80 dentists, the clinic offers a wide range of dental services, including x-rays, examinations, treatment and education. More severe cases are referred to specialists who also volunteer their services.



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The clinic, which sees about 6,000 patients a year, is Christian faith-based but it doesn't discriminate in treating anyone because of their beliefs, Phipps said, adding that some dentists do pray with their patients if the patient wishes.

"We definitely are not ashamed of our faith roots and celebrate the fact that we are engaged in a Christian act of faith when we provide this care," he explained.

"It's an opportunity to emulate Christ and bring Christ into the world," he said. "It's how we act, not what we say, that reveals God to the world. We're helping others beyond just writing a check."

Throughout the clinic, artwork adorns the halls. All the art was created by professional artists at St. Mark's and donated by the church in honor of its 150th anniversary as "gifts to the community."

"It's important to the patients' self worth and dignity" to have a nice place, Phipps said.

The art project was organized by Brenda Kingery, herself a painter. Other artists participating from St. Mark's were Judy and Jim Freeman, Susan McCloskey, Linda Lang, Jenny Crone, Patrice Oliver, Charles Field, Linda Hammond, Enequina Vasquez and Kingery. "These are pretty high-powered artists," Phipps said.

The theme of the permanent installation is Genesis 1, the story of creation. "We thought about light, darkness, day and night, painted expanses of water and dry land, the creation of seed bearing plants, fruit trees, stars, birds and beasts," Kingery said. "Everyday something different was happening."

The creative elements of Genesis fit with the creative concept of Haven for Hope, she said. Each artist created works based on how he or she interpreted the scripture. Different media was also utilized, ranging from textiles to water colors to oil and even ceramics.

"What we wanted to accomplish was to enhance the walls and tell the story of Genesis," Kingery said. "It should be a place of beauty -- a peaceful place for people to come."

"We let God play with our minds," she said.

St. Mark's has a long history of ministering to the homeless. As a downtown church, it has been at the epicenter of the homeless population. For years, it has provided sack lunches to the homeless, so its involvement with Haven for Hope is a natural fit.

"We felt that we have had an opportunity first-hand to see people and talk to them and learn about their struggles to go all over the city to find food, to find shelter, to find clothing," Bridwell said.

"We felt it was incumbent on us to become involved," she said. "We see this as a ministry."

-- Mike Patterson, a former newspaper reporter and editor, is a member of St. Michael and All Angels Church in Blanco, Texas.

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