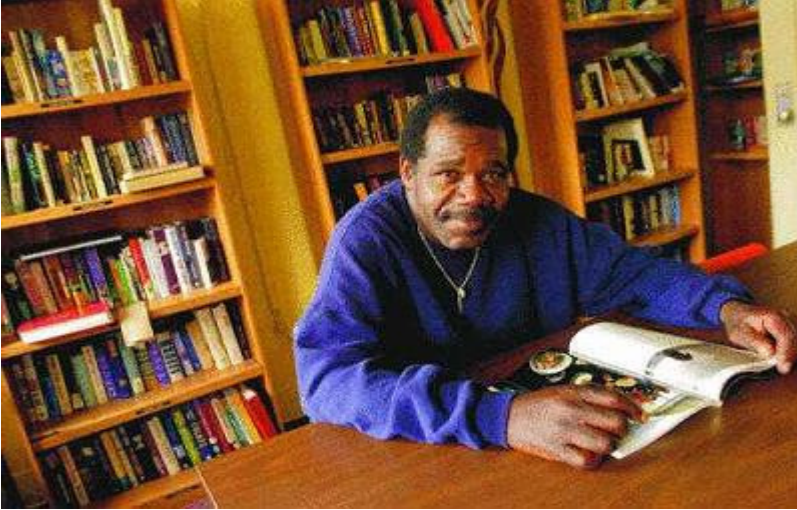


Weather reopens crack in shelter system

PADS seeks more help from churches

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Andrew Greenwood, 51, reads in the library at the PADS shelter in North Chicago. (Thomas Delany, Jr./News-Sun)

Stairwells, parking garages, beneath viaducts. Those are sleeping spots for Johnnie Walker, 50, who for a second straight summer finds himself without a bed.

Sometimes Walker gets lucky and a friend lets him use their couch. But more often he sleeps fitfully, awakened by the shoe of some patrolman who orders him to get up and get out.

"It's lonely," said Walker, who struggled to find a job after a felony conviction eight years ago. He finally found part-time maintenance work, but still can't afford a place to live. "You get tired of wondering where you'll sleep the next night, how the weather's going to turn out, where you're going to get your next meal."

Walker is one of an estimated 100 adults who live on the streets from May through September when PADS Crisis Services, Lake County's homeless shelter system, ceases to offer overnight shelter.

Sandy Stephens, PADS director of operations and services, said that nearly 20 clients showed up on a recent day at PADS headquarters on the VA campus off Buckley Road in North Chicago. At the Drop In Center, the homeless can shower, do laundry and eat a sack lunch. But the same PADS bus that picks up people with nowhere to go at a site in downtown Waukegan, returns them there at 3 p.m. to spend their nights "wherever," Stephens said.

PADS receives an average 10 calls per day from people in search of a place to spend the night.

"We hear a lot of 'I need help,'" Stephens said. "Other agencies call, too, because they don't have places to send people. A social worker from DuPage County called looking for a place for single people who had no place to go. Most agencies are full. They were full last year, too."

PADS is hoping that an area church will volunteer space for an overnight summer shelter. About a dozen churches around Lake County let people sleep on pads on the floor when the weather turns cold. The numbers of homeless have dramatically increased since PADS was founded more than 20 years ago. Changes in the way mental illness is treated have also put more people to wandering.

"The churches that do it in the cold months want their break," Stephens said. "We're hoping a church comes forward, that someone comes forward, even for a few nights a week."

Ideally, a church or other organization would lend both space and volunteers, and PADS would provide food or coordinate visits to soup kitchens, Stephens said.

PADS' three year-round shelters are full. Forty-two people are living at the Family Center, and 12 veterans at Veterans House, both at 8th and Lincoln streets. Fifteen people reside in PADS' Safe Haven program on the VA campus.

Families with children receive first priority through PADS, which works with Catholic Charities to provide short-term motel stays or referrals to family shelters in Kenosha and Chicago.

"We're seeing a lot of people who have lost their jobs or who moved from out of state because they have family here, but the family can no longer put them up," Stephens said.

You can help

To offer help to PADS Crisis Services, call Sandy Stephens at (847) 689-4357, ext. 124.