



March 2009

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself/herself and his/her family, including housing”

(The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25.)

Housing is not a commodity but one of the most important human rights. It is especially crucial to have an apartment or a shelter while living in Chicago during the cold winter season. However, there are many people who cannot afford to pay for the constantly rising housing prices. In 2006 (the most recent data from the Fact Sheet from the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless), “housing wage” in Chicago was more than twice the minimum wage. It is no wonder that life is a struggle for people especially those whose salaries roughly reach the borders. This means that people earning about the minimum wage salaries are not able to afford a two bedroom apartment at fair market value. A minimum-wage worker would need to work two and a half full-time jobs to afford a two-bedroom apartment at the fair market value in Illinois. Chicago is even more expensive to live in than the rest of the State. Here a minimum-wage worker must work about 111 hours per week to afford housing at fair market value. The lack of affordable housing in Illinois is a persistent problem.

Throughout the year about 2.5 million to 3.5 million people experience homelessness in the United States. There are various causes of homelessness ranging from the shortage of rental units through lack of affordable housing to making a choice to leave an abusive relationship that provided some kind of a shelter. In many cities throughout the States poor people are being pushed out from their original place of living by the escalating urban development project. Those gentrification projects demolish low-income public housings and replace them with rental apartments that bring significant gain for the developers. In that way poor people are being pushed further into rental market where they get apartments with living conditions well below the standard. In addition, the demand for public housing is much greater than the supply in Illinois alone.

Public housing is home to over 2 million people in the United States. The city of Chicago has the third largest Public Housing Association. However, over the past four years, capital funding has been eliminated for over 172,000 units of public housing forcing these units to go without repairs that are essential to their continued safety and occupancy. Naturally, the lack of affordable housing has caused the increase in families requesting emergency shelters. As we know women and children are the most vulnerable in this area. Often they are victims of domestic violence or abusive relationships from which many times they have to flee quickly leaving everything behind.

Our Congregational directions also stress the need to assist those who are most vulnerable, namely, women and children.

In response to the needs of the people in our area and to our Congregational directions, Sisters of our Province minister in one of the largest emergency shelters in Chicago. Besides spending the nights in the shelter with homeless women, our Sisters also work as case managers to those who

are looking for a better way of living. In 2008 the Franciscan House of Mary and Joseph provided 84,947 shelter nights and the same number of breakfasts and suppers. They served about 1,300 different individuals. Even though the shelter provides 246 beds for men and women and is open every night of the year, there are still circumstances in which they have to turn people down because of the lack of space. Only last year there were 497 homeless people that they have to turn away because they were filled to capacity.

Another action that our Province has undertaken in solidarity with the destitute is opening our doors for those who are in need of a shelter. Certainly, ministry with the poor takes us out of our comfort zone and teaches us that we are all children of the same God, with the same rights.

We are indeed fortunate to have a good place for living. It is truly a blessing. Thus, every time I hear or read about the needs of others there is a question that arises: what can I do to help others and make the situation better for them? First, during this time of Lent look into your own ability to open your heart to the needy. Perhaps you will find a new way of reaching out to them through prayer, fasting, offering something for the intention of the needy, etc. Then, look around and maybe you will find someone who will need your encouragement to find a better way of living.

*Shelter us, O Lord, and give us the compassion and
knowledge to help others in their search for shelter.
Protect us, O Lord, from darkness, and give us the
wisdom and skills to protect others who live in unsafe
and unhealthy housing and long for the light.
Bless us, O Lord, with homes that make comfort and
joy realities for our families, and give us the grace to
ensure this for all families.
Amen.*

By: Education for Justice