

HELPING HOMELESS MEN BEGIN A NEW LIFE

*A Program on Chicago's West Side Provides
Substance Abuse Rehabilitation and Job Training*

BY SR. JEAN MAHER,
DC, & SR. THERESA
PECK, DC

Sr. Maher is program director, MARSEPH, Chicago; Sr. Peck is president, Saint Joseph Health Centers and Hospital, Chicago.

Urban America is in crisis. We witness it every day, firsthand, on Chicago's tough west side. Crime, drugs, violence, poverty—it is all here, and more real than any video footage on the evening news.

Theories abound on how to attack these problems; myriad public-sector programs exist. Yet tangible results are few.

The MARSEPH program hopes to change this. Through MARSEPH, we attack one problem—homelessness among African-American men—by preparing them for employment. It is a holistic, flexible program that gives participants a chance to start fresh in the working world. MARSEPH is named for the two principal program collaborators—the Marillac Social Center and Saint Joseph Health Centers and Hospital. The Daughters of Charity sponsor both.

MARSEPH is a project that gives Daughters of Charity social work and healthcare ministries an opportunity to work collaboratively to help poor persons who are caught in a cycle of unemployment and homelessness. Men who wholeheartedly enter the program experience a total life change.

Summary The MARSEPH program, named for the two principal program collaborators—the Marillac Social Center and Saint Joseph Health Centers and Hospital—provides life and work skills to homeless men who visit a day shelter operated by the Marillac Social Center. Participants gain work experience at Saint Joseph.

One of the most important aspects of the MARSEPH program is the removal of obstacles to the newly employed. Each MARSEPH participant receives housing assistance, a uniform, transportation to Saint Joseph Health Centers and Hospital,

THE PROGRAM

The goal of the MARSEPH program, which is funded by the Saint Joseph Health Care Foundation and several private foundations, is to provide life and work skills to homeless men who visit a day shelter operated by the Marillac Social Center. Participants gain work experience at Saint Joseph Health Centers and Hospital (see **Box**).

Homeless men are at serious risk of never entering or, in some cases, reentering mainstream society. They are usually poor, have minimal education, and live in an area that has suffered devastating disinvestment as good, working-class jobs have slowly disappeared. Often, MARSEPH participants have never had a steady job; other times, they have lost their future in an economy undergoing “structural” change. Alcoholism, drug addiction, and outright dispossession are common.

The MARSEPH program gives homeless men the chance they need to make it on their own. After being assessed by shelter staff, the men who have the potential and desire to succeed in a mentored work environment are selected for MARSEPH. They must demonstrate an attitude of openness and a willingness to strive to become

and a meal pass to the hospital's cafeteria. Through this assistance, the men can get off the streets, get to their jobs, be nourished, and look presentable.

The MARSEPH program carefully monitors each participant's progress, to ensure his success. Case workers meet weekly with the men to discuss problems and concerns. Every week case workers also visit each participant's residence to monitor his living conditions and offer emotional support. At the end of the six-month training program, MARSEPH helps graduates find employment.

In each issue of *Health Progress* in 1995, the journal's 75th anniversary logo highlights an article of particular significance to the Catholic health ministry.

a part of mainstream society and give up their destructive lifestyles.

Men are initially assigned jobs at Saint Joseph Health Centers and Hospital in either the dietary, environmental services (house-keeping), or laundry departments. During their six months in the program, participants are cross-trained in the three departments. The emphasis of the training is on learning new tasks, acquiring marketable skills in a variety of areas, and maintaining a professional attitude.

During the program, each participant receives a stipend. Two days' pay is put into a savings account each pay period, and an additional incentive is paid for each full week of perfect attendance.

REMOVING OBSTACLES

One of the most important aspects of the MARSEPH program is the removal of obstacles to the newly employed. It is almost impossible to start a new job without clean clothes, bus fare, or lunch money. Each MARSEPH participant receives housing assistance, a uniform, transportation to Saint Joseph Health Centers and Hospital, and a meal pass to the hospital's cafeteria. Through this assistance, the men can get to their jobs, be nourished, and look presentable.

The Chicago Housing Authority is also helping out by making six apartments available for rent to MARSEPH participants near Saint Joseph Health Centers and Hospital. Other housing arrangements can be made, depending on circumstances. Some families agree to let a man come home once he proves he is doing something positive and constructive.

Saint Joseph Health Centers and Hospital physicians and staff provide MARSEPH partici-



Steven Reed, a MARSEPH participant, and Sr. Maher

pants with a comprehensive medical examination, inoculations, and other necessary medical services.

CAREFUL MONITORING

The MARSEPH program carefully monitors each participant's progress, to ensure his success. Case workers meet weekly with the men as a group to discuss problems and concerns. Every week case workers also visit each participant's residence to monitor his living conditions and offer

emotional support. Individual counseling is also available if needed.

Because many homeless men enter the program with little or no work experience, they often do not know how to stay on a regular schedule. Department supervisors help participants by becoming their mentors. Supervisors do not lower their expectations, but try to show more patience when working with MARSEPH participants.

FINDING WORK

At the end of the six-month training program, MARSEPH helps graduates find employment. If a job is available at Saint Joseph Health Centers and Hospital, MARSEPH participants are considered. Since the program's inception, the hospital has offered employment to 14 participants.

Socially conscious companies, such as Hyatt and Zenith, and several small manufacturing firms and social service centers have hired MARSEPH graduates. During the past three-and-a-half years, approximately 30 percent of participants have taken full-time jobs. These men are now productive members of society.

A COMMUNITY BENEFIT

We believe other healthcare institutions should consider launching a life- and work-skills program like MARSEPH. Although these are challenging



Cooper and Sr. Peck

times for hospitals, there are still ways for us to use our current resources to help people in our communities.

Word has spread to other parts of Chicago, and probation and parole officers, as well as social service agencies, are referring

men from outside the Marillac shelter to the program. As a result, MARSEPH staff members are hoping to enlarge the program to include more hospitals and more employers so that men who

are waiting to begin MARSEPH can be accommodated.

MARSEPH contributes to the overall quality of life in our community. As healthcare providers, we need to recognize that if we are ever going to recover our inner cities, we have got to begin by providing opportunities for education and employment and ultimately a livelihood and a life. MARSEPH does not provide charity care; it provides a community benefit by helping persons most likely to need charity care if they do not get off the street and join society. □

"On the street no one has hope," says Larry Morris, a formerly homeless man who has received job training through MARSEPH. "I'm out now and, with hard work and determination, I'll stay out." □

HOW MARSEPH HELPS

In its three-and-a-half-year history, more than 100 men, most referred by the Marillac homeless day shelter, have entered the MARSEPH program. "We are making a noticeable difference in the lives of a group of individuals who need special attention," says MARSEPH Senior Case Worker David Gerald. "We offer an opportunity for a man to get his life together by working at a respectable job, earning a small income, and ultimately receiving a work reference."

Chicago attorney Phil Doran has helped several of the program's graduates find jobs. "I basically call people I know who might be able to help," explains Doran. "The people who help us know how tough it is in today's job market. They recognize the risks of hiring someone with a former drug or alcohol problem, but they take a chance whenever they can."

Robert Cooper, 24, came to MARSEPH from a Salvation Army rehabilitation program. Like all MARSEPH participants, Cooper signed a contract that spelled out the terms of the six-month training session. All MARSEPH participants pledge to remain drug and alcohol free and meet the requirements of their assigned job, including maintaining a good attendance

record, being at work on time, and displaying a positive attitude.

"I have worked with more than 30 men in the MARSEPH program, and all of them have been very good workers," states Nelson Collins, an environment services supervisor. "Not one of them has been negative or had a bad attitude. They understand what they have to do and they carry it out."

Cooper had perfect attendance while working in the hospital's environment services department. On the basis of his performance and work attitude, the hospital offered him permanent employment. He also was assigned housing in a MARSEPH-sponsored residential program. He has since "graduated" from that housing and made his own independent living arrangements.

During a recent hospitalwide work transformation program, Cooper applied for a position in a pilot unit as a member of an innovative care-giver team. Through interviews with all applicants by an internal team drawn from many hospital disciplines, Cooper was selected for an upgraded position on a demonstration unit, where he is employed currently.