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Sharon M. Keigher  
*University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee*

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# Rediscovering the Asylum

SHARON M. KEIGHER

Associate Professor  
School of Social Welfare  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

*Spending a night at a typical big city shelter for the homeless has reminded the author of the massive and regimented environment in institutions that she had mistakenly believed no longer existed after the much acclaimed "deinstitutionalization" of America. St. Mary's is run by a religious order attempting to provide charitable care in a non-demanding environment. Many demands are made, however. The lack of privacy and respect for individuality inherent in institutional life tends to erode the "inmate's" very conception of self. It controls their activities, time, and choices, and thus creates barriers to exit. Providing "shelter" for the homeless just repeats the cycle of ephemeral reforms replete in America's previous approaches to controlling the poor. As a nation we should acknowledge that we are institutionalizing the poor again, as inefficiently and inhumanely as we ever have.*

I confess. I am among that growing army of academics making careers off the misery of others. I study homelessness, the only apparent growth industry in the human services. When I packed off to a large midwestern city last summer from my pleasant little campus town to do a study of the needs of the homeless elderly, I knew I would learn a lot. What I didn't know was how much I would relearn about the field of social welfare.

In the course of interviewing policy makers and social workers who "service" the homeless elderly, I needed to get closer to the issues. As a social worker, I needed to identify with what I was hearing about, to get a feel for the shelter system. So I arranged to spend a night at one of the largest shelters in the city. There are over forty shelters in this city, all operated by private non-profit organizations. This is one of the few that receives no city funding, and that stays open year-round.

The following describes my stay at St. Mary's shelter<sup>1</sup> one night in July 1987. The quotations are extracted from the field notes I took the next day.

I met Sue at a downtown Protestant church and together we rode the bus out to the shelter. She introduced herself as "Sister" and was wearing what looked like a nun's habit, but she wore red fingernail polish and smoked quite a lot. She is a very religious person, also very mature and has a strong sense of responsibility. She is an older student at a local Protestant seminary, who talked freely of her recent personal life: her alcohol problem and her ongoing involvement with her ex-husband and her grown son.

The bus took us to one of the more deteriorated industrial areas of town, near a huge Catholic church, Our Lady of the Precious Blood, just on the edge of an expressway in a predominantly black neighborhood. The shelter itself is a former factory, chosen for its size, high open ceilings, and acres of vacant space. It now sleeps approximately 250 people, 200 men and 50 women, with the men in two huge rooms each with about 100 beds. The women sleep in a separate dormitory room.

We arrived about 6 pm. The Brothers and the other female staff member, Kathy, all white, were just fixing dinner. It was a pickup process with everybody making something for himself. I met the Brothers, one by one: four men in their late 20s and early 30s, generally very quiet who all said hello, politely introduced themselves, and asked what I was doing here. I mentioned research. No one really said anything about their work.

They all live in one area of the building in a community room surrounded by five bedrooms, a bathroom, a small kitchen, and chapel (one of only two areas in the shelter that has air conditioning). The news was of one of the older permanent residents, Eddy, who is kind of a trustee. Seventy-five years old, black (like about half of the residents), and a recovered alcoholic, he had been beaten up that day and robbed of his social security check. But the good news was that *this* time, the police had actually observed this incident and arrested the two young kids that did it right on the spot. Apparently Eddy got his money back. He was not hurt as badly as he was a few months

ago when he was beaten up so badly he required stitches and two days of care at County Hospital for a bleeding eye, facial lacerations and swelling, and severe bruises.

Today I went in with Sue to visit him at his bed. He'd been sleeping and was pretty groggy, and his face was swollen. Although he had lost a couple more teeth and bloodied his nose, he was pleased the police had caught the guys this time. He tried to smile.

Over dinner I learned that the Brothers consider it a matter of pride that they receive *no* government money. Last summer the city financed a renovation of the bathrooms on both ends of the building (the shelter had to be closed for three months), but beyond that St. Mary's receives no compensation for their regular operations. They are entirely dependent on donations.

As we ate I noticed an unusual array of food in the kitchen and the freezer: single servings of frozen pizza they get from the school district, a big box of splotchy bananas, "day old bread" which is picked up regularly from a bakery, and donuts that were "sweating" in the heat. A wide variety of food establishments donate all kinds of products, which may explain why Sue and Brother Tom worry about the nutrition of the staff. In addition they get the standard bulk commodities from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

At seven o'clock I was invited to participate with the religious community prayer service. We each took turns reading passages from the breviary, an experience I haven't had since I worked at a Catholic summer camp during high school. It felt a little reminiscent, both uplifting and familiar. The power and comfort of prayer is real, as was the feeling of community. I felt privileged to be involved in such good work, like it would also make me good. It also felt like the lull before the storm.

And eight o'clock, with a long line of residents already outside, the first group of women were let into their dormitory. This large high-ceilinged room sleeps 50 women in beds end to end and tonight it was completely full. Its two doors enter through the men's dormitory and are closely watched.

All but one of the women seemed to be regular residents. Each is assigned a regular bed. The sheets are changed once a week unless someone has an accident. On laundry day residents

remove the sheets in the morning and when they return in the evening a clean pile of sheets is on each bed. Each woman makes up her own bed, as do transient residents every night.

In a long line the women entered the dormitory and shuffled around, most going directly to their beds. A few took showers. We had made up some cold lemonade earlier, and the women helped themselves to it and the soup. I thought the soup was particularly good. The cook had recycled the bean casserole from the night before, added some vegetables, and it had all kinds of things in it. But it was hardly what I needed, given that it was over ninety degrees outside. Indeed, the oppressive heat in this dorm was so stifling that more than once I thought I might suffocate. There were just two small windows and three fans. The lack of windows seems to be related to the obvious dangers in the surrounding neighborhood. I wondered how we would sleep.

The women at this facility are generally mentally disabled, and quite different in this respect from the men. As the women came in, they were all clutching bags, mostly plastic. Several had tremors, presumably from taking medication. They looked disheveled and exhausted from the heat. Sue had said things had been somewhat tense at the shelter lately because there had been a holiday. Most of the women were having their periods at the same time, they had just received their checks, and "of course," as she said, "had been out getting drunk." They were friendly as we sat at the old formica tables while they ate. Several talked easily. There was younger group who seemed to be in their twenties and thirties, and another group in their late fifties.

Besides the tables, the women's dorm has other homey informal touches, a few couches and a rug in the corner, and a lot of recycled old religious paintings hung high on the walls. Most of the beds have beat up old dressers next to them. This contrasts with the men's dorm, which is virtually wall to wall beds. The older men seem to be long-term street people, or they live in and out of SRO hotels, or sometimes they stay with relatives. There were not many older men, but several seemed to be permanent residents. The mean age was probably thirty-five to forty, however, with most in their thirties, some particularly young.

Sue notes that many of the men do work during the day, as opposed to the women. The men sell newspapers, collect cans, or do day labor. A few were notably well dressed, two or three in nice business suits, looking like they had just come from an office downtown. I was told many are meeting their financial obligations, especially paying child support, but doing so leaves them nothing for rent. It is estimated that twenty-five percent of the male residents are paying child support.

Appearances are deceiving though. I observed one fellow who looked quite well dressed, but acted suspiciously with shifting eyes, like a gangster, I thought. Later, overhearing him talk with the social worker, I realized he was very confused about dates and what was happening. He said he wanted to get into a training program. His weird behavior and darting eyes, which looked intimidating to me, were probably more likely to get him arrested than be recognized as symptomatic of a disability.

After "helping out" (I wasn't *doing* anything) in the women's dorm for a half hour I went over to serve soup in the men's dining area. This small area has standup tables, a big painting of Martin Luther King high on one wall and the Last Supper on the other, and of course, a big crucifix. The eating area is small, but given that 200 men are served each night, the line moves surprisingly quickly and quietly. A few stood around to talk and appeared to be people who "know the place."

During supper an old very regular resident who is apparently somewhat demented came into the dining room, and one of the young residents, about twenty-two years old, started yelling at him. The young man went out and got one of the Brothers from the front of the building. The Brother escorted the old man out with a minimal amount of disturbance. Apparently the old man had a knife. He either mentioned this or threatened the young man, and of course that's forbidden. The police came. You have to kind of admire his bravado and independence, even though he lacks an accurate sense of self anymore. "After all," Sue observed, "he's not in a nursing home." The community feels somewhat protective toward him.

By the time I got back to the women's dorm they were on their way to bed, and after that it was dead quiet. It was really dark.

*Social Services*

In the meantime the social workers from Health Care for the Homeless arrived and interviewed many of the men. The Brothers compile a list of who wants to see them and interviews are held in a small room as each waits his turn to take a shower. As it gets later, they tell the waiting men to go to bed; writing down their bed number to find them in the dark. Frequently the men are asleep by the time the social worker gets there.

Some are trying to get into job programs, but most men requested concrete things like bus tokens. Bill, the young black social worker with long reggae braids listened sympathetically to one young guy's rather unconvincing story. He responded, "Well, I'm always willing to go half way with you. " He gave him two bus tokens and said "here's my phone number. I'll be there during the lunch hour tomorrow. When you get out there on the first job interview, phone me, and I will come get you and take you to the next place." That's his way of dealing with those he doesn't expect will follow through.

One of the men was hoping to get into a training program to become a semi-trailer-truck driver. He had an address he could use, had driven such a truck before, knew the business, and had a real job interview. He also needed bus tokens. His prospects seemed good.

I was especially taken with an old Dutchman in his late seventies who had only one leg. He came in after his shower, bare chested and wearing heavy trousers and an artificial leg he had carved for himself out of a two by six inch plank. It was attached to his suspenders. He had lost his leg in a train accident in 1929 when he was very young. He had never married and had done unskilled labor all his life. Recently, through the intervention of Health Care for the Homeless, he has been to County Hospital where he was found to have cancer of the prostate. He recently found blood in his urine so he is going back again for tests. He was very congenial and somewhat forgetful. He was most appreciative of what the social workers were doing, which involved a passel of paperwork. Tonight his social worker had brought a copy of his birth certificate (which was needed to get his benefits straightened out), for which he had been waiting

for three months. He apparently had never seen it before. He slowly read the names of both of his parents out loud and his eyes watered up. He held the paper in both hands and stared at it . . . for a long.

I was acutely aware of the smell, that sweet but not pleasant smell of a fresh lockerroom. It was not terribly awful, but 100 bodies unconscious in one room with so little ventilation, only a foot or two apart, assaults the senses, including one's sense of compassion.

It suddenly struck me how much this sea of helplessness looked like the old wards at St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, DC where I had my first social work job in 1971, and where Erving Goffman did the field work for *Asylums*. And it was like Fircrest School for the severely retarded in Seattle where I was an intern in 1966, and like the Good Shepherd Home for maladjusted girls where I worked in 1969. The old wards, the "cottages," the "wings," the "dorms" used to look exactly like this: crowded, massive, regimented, anonymous, and devoid of privacy. The institution forces one to accept whatever is offered if one wants to (or must) stay. These homeless people are not "committed" or sentenced, but what's the difference. Clearly they are not going anywhere else.

Back in the women's dorm Sue and Kathy thoughtfully offered me the staff bed and I was uncomfortable enough to be grateful. Sue slept on the couch, Kathy took the floor. I was too hot to even put on the old night gown I was given from the supply closet. I stripped down to my underwear and covered up with my shirt, trying to let nothing touch my clammy skin. The air was so stagnant, it was genuinely difficult to breathe. Why would anyone stay here, if they could sleep *anywhere* outside? The lights went off at nine o'clock, and I finally dozed off at eleven. I noticed a lot of coughing, really a lot, and am not surprised to hear there is a lot of tuberculosis in the shelters. A lot of women have various medicines on their dressers provided by the resident doctors (from one of the local hospitals) who would come tomorrow. There was also a lot of tossing and turning, walking, and flushing of toilets.



At five in the morning the lights came on very gradually, like a Chinese water torture, one set at a time. Kathy had been up a half hour already to wake someone who had to go to work. Some women quietly started moving, locating coffee, showering, dressing and gathering their stuff.

It was six o'clock before most of the women were actually up. You could see a lot were going to remain in bed until the very last minute. Over coffee and day old sweet rolls I talked with a few women about what they would do today. It was already near ninety degrees. Most would go downtown to one of the women's daytime drop-in centers. Many make a regular circuit, take the shelter bus downtown to one of several centers, eat there or at different soup kitchens, and walk to one of the Catholic shelters at the end of the day to catch a bus back out here.

I talked with a young woman, well dressed in a clean sun dress outfit who looked like she worked at a dime store. (I *wanted* to ask why she wasn't going to work.) She said her husband stays here too, but they are leaving town next week. She had been here for six months, although she'd been put out of this shelter last week. "I got into a fight and was asked to leave. It was after ten o'clock at night." As we talked I began to realize she is an extremely angry person, has picked fights, and has a vile mouth. She usually goes to a women's drop-in center to play cards during the day. She seems to have an attitude problem, especially toward work, but she also seems to be bored. She thought she'd go to a different drop in center today. She was looking forward to leaving next week.

By six-fifteen all the women except one straggler were gone, and by six-thirty the last bus left for downtown. Unless people want to get stuck in this desolate neighborhood—which no one does—they manage to catch that last bus. Some women left their things neatly under the beds, on the bureaus by the beds, or in lockers. With such a permanence to the residence, how senseless and abnormal it seems to shove everyone out the door at six-thirty, when so few have anyplace to go.

As the women ate breakfast Kathy was already gathering the laundry, beginning to clean up for the day. As soon as the last woman left, one of the men came in with a huge basket of dirty

linen. By seven o'clock only the staff remained in the building, hard at work sweeping, piling, scrubbing, and cooking.

I walked with one of the Brothers down a quiet vacant street strewn with broken glass over to Precious Blood Church, then to the subway and out to friend's home by 8 am. It was as if nothing had happened, except that I felt drained and shaken. Later I took a *very* long shower.

\* \* \* \* \*

### What is an Asylum?

In his classic study, *Asylums*, Goffman notes that the "total institution" is symbolized most fundamentally by the barriers it creates against social intercourse with the outside world. (Goffman, 1961, p. 4) It does this essentially through the internal ways that it processes people, particularly by breaking down the normal barriers between the spheres of work, play, and sleep in daily life. Shelters for the homeless theoretically serve only one of these functions for their inmates—providing a bed in which to sleep. But in fact their "inmates'" daily lives are so devoid of either work *or* play, that in effect the shelter aggravates the absence of both of these. The shelter has become for them, as well as society, a truncated kind of asylum.

In addition, the shelter imposes such abnormal constraints on the resident that a civil life is impossible. The curfew, the abnormally early time at which one must leave in the morning, and the unpleasant, dangerous, and inconvenient location, requiring extensive walking or planning of transportation are all primary demands that restrict what a resident can do with the other fourteen hours in his or her day. These are barriers against social interaction with the civil world. The activities of daily living become a deadened routine, singular activities performed in the company of other "inmates" on buses, at drop-in centers, soup kitchens, public places, emergency rooms, gang showers and dormitory beds. The circuit simply kills time. It is neither work nor play.

Goffman characterizes total institutions by the distinctive dehumanizing social pressures they impose on staff and in-

mates. Their socialization and adaptation processes first mortify the initiate. They impose a "reorganization of the self" through their privilege and sanction systems, forcing realignments between the self and the outside world. A cultural milieu develops. Finally, exit becomes increasingly difficult. The voluntary nature and charitable base of religious communities, such as the one at St. Mary's, overlay these processes with a particularly subtle demoralizing character.

The most obvious, external role distinctions at St. Mary's are those of race. Located in a desperately poor, deindustrialized zone whose only permanent residents now (except at the shelter) are black, the religious community and staff—the helpers—are remarkably white.

The residents are largely men, many with some attachments to this neighborhood, at least by history. This includes older white men, usually alcoholics, who at one time lived in the flop houses and worked at the day labor agencies that used to dot the area. They also include younger black men with family in the neighborhood.

The shelter residents are mixed among four strata. The first group have beds in an alcove area off the permanent residents' dormitory (not air conditioned). Eddy was in this group of older men who are allowed to stay around during the day in exchange for doing some work for the facility. A second group are the one hundred permanent residents. The third group are the putatively transient residents who occupy the other large dorm. Most of these residents are here regularly also. The fourth group are the women who all occupy the women's dorm regardless of "status," permanency, or predictability.

The most meaningfully role distinctions which shape life in the house surround the acceptance of the religious life which is the basis for the community at this shelter. There is no overt proselytizing or required prayer, however, as in the fundamentalist Protestant missions. There is some blending of staff and resident roles for those who become "lifers," but the religious community is clearly demarcated. Among staff, the Brothers' investment is virtually permanent and quite distinct from the female staff and the lay order volunteers who live and work here also. The lay order men have their own private dormitory

area (distinguishable because it also has airconditioning). They are mainly older men, recovered alcoholics, who are also paid a small amount for specific jobs like cooking and laundry.

Female staff fill some critical gaps, in their own way serving both the female guests and the religious community. Sue, for example, was planning to fix a big dinner for the Brothers on Sunday and her caring, maternal influence is appreciated. Kathy, on the other hand, a member of the lay order, does the heavy manual work in the women's dorm. She is on duty the most, gets little relief, is largely cutoff from other social interactions, and, like the Brothers, probably at risk of burn out. Most importantly, the two women staff manage all the female residents, a chore the Brothers would find impossible without them. Still, the women are not the central part of the structure.

The Brothers have a special risk, being of this institution but having none of the "cooled out" protection of the street people. (Goffman, pp. 11–12) As responsible staff they interact with each other all day with no anchoring or family life apart from the institution. They seek diversions from each other during the day. Sue mentioned Brother Tom's concern about burn out, and about their nutrition.

The amount of physical work involved in running a shelter cannot be overstated. The staff consider the laundry, cleaning, and preparing food, to be the Lord's work. These massive daily functions are the rationale given, however, for why the residents have to clear out at six in the morning—so that this "real" work can begin. There is a sense of manual production to this work. It is very routinized and there is a kind of processing mentality to it which carries over to processing bodies.

Processing people is a matter of writing down their names and assigning them to a bed, or acknowledging they are there and assigning them to the usual bed, since most beds are used regularly by the same persons. Similar routines carry over to handing out linens, handing out soup, water, and bread, handing out aspirins and soap, and nightgowns, washcloths, razors, and kotex—all of which have been donated. It is the personification of charity.

Despite the ideals, intentions, and effort of staff to individualize the attention paid to guests, by their nature, such

routines make individuation virtually impossible. Efficiency makes forceful demands. For example, the cook is a gruff, no nonsense man who can stretch the soup as far as it has got to go on a given night and still give it taste. But, constantly barraged by requests for "seconds" and for special items, he routinely ignores or denies them.

When we were nearly finished serving on the soup line, Sue said she was going to make some lemonade (presumably for the kitchen staff). One of the very well dressed residents overheard that and vociferously complained that there was only water available on the counter, and where was the lemonade. I asked the cook if there was any lemonade, and he snapped back, "No." I felt embarrassed given that the guy had obviously heard Sue comment that she was making some.

Institutions apply sanctions against non-compliant behavior, whether they intend to or not. This shelter has a rather inelastic range of sanction options, however, limited basically to barring residents from admission for a specified period of time. Residents are regularly "barred" for being drunk, fighting, stealing, or otherwise disrupting or offending others. Offense is easily given, because of the lack of privacy.

Kathy recently barred a woman for a month who was masturbating in the bed in front of the others while the lights were still on. Her behavior really upset nearly everyone in the dorm. I'm not sure if she was put out then in the night or if they waited until morning.

One of the most serious violations, however, is upsetting the work routines of the institution.

A tall, thin and spacey black woman kept bumming cigarettes from Elaine (seriously pushing her luck). In the morning she was still in the shower at six-thirty after everyone else had left. Elaine reminded her of the time, but this did not expedite her departure. Finally, exasperated, Elaine barred her from the shelter for several days. She declared, irritatedly, "I warned her about this three times before."

Control is also exerted in more informal, subjective and refined fashion. Some things can be done for those who really

need it, such as sharing cigarettes, giving extra soap, or lotion, saving nice clothing from the donations for especially needy or grateful persons, and fixing cold drinks.

As Goffman notes, the institution controls privileges, granting special considerations, exceptions, and dispensing special items. Some residents, however, acculturated to this system know better than others how to work it, despite the alienation this creates for themselves.

Jolene, a very fat white woman in her late fifties took about five towels, which irritated Kathy. Jolene explained to all who would listen that she has a rash on her butt (which is quite large) and so she needed two towels plus a bathmat, plus a towel to put on her bed for the rash. She claimed someone took her towel during the day, and got spots on it, like they sat on it and got feces on it.

Later she took a long time in the toilet, apparently washing herself (in privacy which is not available in the showers). She was very cranky and complaining about everything, which naturally annoyed everyone else, especially Kathy and Elaine.

In the morning, although it was laundry day, she didn't remove her sheets. Instead she left a note on her bed, "do not take my linens. I launder my own. Elaine was mildly annoyed, but she admitted the towels probably are hard on Jolene's skin because they are washed in very harsh detergent.

There is no pleasing a "guest" like Jolene, and no way such a guest can feel good about being in an institution.

Then there are those who will *not* be realigned with the institution's or *any* of society's regulation, despite the amount of coercion directed their way.

In the morning Sue said one woman had been up several times in the night pestering her neighbors. She is the one who is so offensive, who runs around in the nude. They don't tolerate that, so she has been asked to leave a few times. She is the same woman Sue mentioned who is completely irresponsible with things that have been given to her. Sue gave her a nice nightgown once, and saw her downtown a couple of days later, wearing it. Then she had her period on it, so it had a great big red spot in the back. She saw her downtown wearing it again a few days later, looking absolutely terrible.

This individual has no social grace at all, but she is clearly mentally disabled. "It is as if she worked at being repulsive." She had been seen downtown panhandling. She is so repugnant that she attracts attention to herself. The other women want absolutely nothing to do with her, here or on the streets.

Such persons do not last at any shelter for long.

In each small activity, the resident is forced to make a re-alignment of the "self" with the institutional world. For inmates, passive compliance is the most prudent choice, requiring the least expenditure of limited personal resources.

One of the women, who normally stays at other shelters, explained how she came to St. Marys, "because it really doesn't help to complain." "You don't complain, it's not the thing to do, because nothing changes. If you don't like it, it's just better to move." She'd been having trouble at another shelter with this woman who was following her around and pestering her. She had been over at St. Stephens for a couple nights, but she really wanted to get away from this woman. So last night she had just decided to split. The bus to St. Mary's comes by there, so she got on it just at the very last minute. Then she panicked, "because the other woman suddenly noticed me, and she came out and banged on the bus door and tried to get on too." She was very relieved when they wouldn't let the other woman on, so she got to St. Mary's without her.

"It's hard, you know, when somebody could be pestering you like that, or you might not like the bed they gave you, or the food, or something, and you might get a bed next to someone who smells bad, or talks all night, or would come over and bother your bed or something. And so it's just the thing to do, to just leave, to get away."

Even passive resistance in the shelter system requires planning, strategizing and resources, since one's day becomes structured around getting away from such persons, or finding a way back to the shelter, or returning some place to get one's stuff. Extensive planning is required even to arrange for getting temporary relief.

I asked how one could get out of the heat during the day. Some talked of places to go, like the library. Trying to be nonchalant, I said "how about hanging out at the meat department at a

grocery store to cool off?" I was upbraided sternly by an indignant woman who said I must be pretty stupid. "Don't you be hanging around in places where you don't have no business. You be out of there." Several said they were going down near the lake today. The music festival had just ended there, and it wouldn't be quite cleaned up yet.

Two or three other women are friends and occasionally, when they can get some money together, they get a motel for a few days. They report it is great to watch TV, take long showers in private, and sleep as late as you want, all with airconditioning!

Elaine described the kind of self-respect that shelter life normally erodes. Inmates keep such sources of relief to themselves.

I asked one woman where she goes on weekends, since she is never here. It turns out she stays on the weekends with a boyfriend. The woman responded indignantly, "I can still get me some, you know."

The institution's dependence on donations, of course, is an external constraint which directly restricts the range of options open to residents. It creates the environment in which the inmate culture develops, thus limiting the personal choices available. The motives of donors and volunteers might sometimes be questioned. (Government intervention is not the only threat to the shelter's autonomy.) One wonders whose interests are really served by tax-deductible donations which, having already failed the consumer test, further negate inmate preferences.

In the morning I noticed a large supply of beauty products in the womens bathroom. When asked about this, Sue said the women were so sick of this stuff that they don't even use it. "We get it by the crate, all the stuff the company doesn't sell. I can't even give that stuff away any more."

The same can be said of all the amenities provided here. It is clearly a fundamental principle to refuse government money, and to rely on the charitable instincts of people familiar with the shelter operation and the church.

On the other hand inmates who don't like it can only walk away, which some do. The inmate's own choices are all poor.



Some give up, but for others getting out permanently becomes only a kind of "binge fantasy."

One pleasant looking Irish-Polish woman, Margaret, age fifty-eight (who looked a lot older) told me about how she gets by on General Assistance at \$154 per month. She is hoping, "If I can just hang in here for two more years I can get me Social Security." She would qualify through one of her ex-husbands, "then I'm gonna get me an apartment, a studio, all my own. Mostly I just want a kitchen."

The impediments placed in the way of such rational determination illustrate the deterrent power of the current shelter system.

### So How Does Society "Cure" Homelessness?

St. Mary's also provides us with a window onto the dilemmas faced by those who manage homelessness. The good motives and intentions of any shelter operation must be compared to their result. The irony is that, in analyzing outcomes, the shelters themselves have been blamed for creating dependency.

There exists a tension between the Progressive rehabilitative ideal (the curative forces of agents like Health Care for the Homeless) and the notion of acceptance, charity, and institutional maintenance ideal which is palpable at St. Mary's. St. Mary's calls itself a non-demanding environment. On one level it represents modern post-Progressive reform movements of the libertarian ideal of deinstitutionalization, as opposed to the curative spirit of the asylum in Jacksonian America. (Rothman, 1971).

However, in today's "climate of opinion" there is a fine line between intervention approaches that 1) truly offer libertarian solutions, 2) ones that are libertarian but are *not* solutions, and 3) similar libertarian approaches which are inherently socially controlling and punitive. The dependent today, who used to live in institutions, are on the streets if not in shelters. We seem to have achieved wholesale erosion of intermediate alternatives—simple affordable and private housing.

Reflecting on the deinstitutionalization movement, Rothman notes, "the prospect that the two sides (the civil rights lawyers versus the psychiatrists) might join together to satisfy client's

rights and needs, to see to it that the objects of benevolence were allowed to exercise choice without losing the benefits of expert assistance, has not materialized. What has emerged instead is open and declared warfare. (Gaylin, et al, 1981, p. 172) Homeless people are caught in the cross-fire, as symbolized by highly publicized cases like Joyce Brown, Mayor Koch and the New York ACLU.

As Rothman notes in a prescient passage on what the 1980s had in store for American Society, "... there is every indication that public funds will get scarcer and scarcer and private interests will battle all the more fiercely to protect themselves. In such a situation, considerations of the social welfare of minorities (mentally ill, indigent, and sick people) have little prospect of being realized. We may well prove incapable of satisfying either rights *or* needs." (Gaylin, et al, 1981, p. 183). Indeed, as governments deliberately set out to do less and less, eventually Americans may conclude we can save the most public money by having government do nothing at all.

Note, for example, Goffman's description of the outlets a "civil society" normally provides for people which are denied by institutions.

In civil society, an individual pushed to the wail in one of his social roles usually has an opportunity to crawl into some protected place where he can indulge in commercialized fantasy—movies, TV, radio, reading—or employ "relievers" like cigarettes or drink. In total institutions, especially right after admission, these materials may be too little available. At the time when these resting points are most needed, they may be most difficult to obtain. (Goffman, 1961, p. 70)

Virtually none of these "relievers" are available to the homeless person today, whether in a shelter or not. Rothman concludes that we will see an erosion again of the Progressive ideal, and growth of the liberty ideal in the name of fiscal conservatism. We already have. That's what homelessness is all about.

The problem in cities like this is that a constituency for deinstitutionalization has been created, and it is becoming a constituency for another kind of "Progressive" dependency with

even less benevolence. It is reinstitutionalization all over again on an increasingly inadequate scale. Forced into a shrinking budgetary box, not-for-profit and religious organizations *are* playing ball with the city, whether they receive public money or not. They provide the only overnight shelter there is, in the most minimal, and still voluntary way.

Aggressive treatment of homelessness is still saved for the street people who are the most recalcitrant, visibly repugnant, or pitiful. It serves the needs of retail outlets, commuters, and tourists, but not those of its victims. A conscious and just society would provide more adequately than this as a permanent way of life. As Rothman and Rothman (1984, p. 360) have queried, "Where is the logic, or equity, in a system that upon discovering a homeless man shivering and incoherent on a subway platform will expend \$15,000 on him for three days in an intensive care unit and then release him penniless to suffer who knows what fate? Why not acknowledge the efficient and cheap methods we have used so reliably in the past, albeit inhumanely, and recognize we are doing it badly again. The shelter "system" offers too little humanity to be a reasonable alternative to homelessness.

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Now a year has passed. I have an even larger investment in my study, which keeps getting bigger and more ambitious. I have a much more real sense of the needs of homeless people, their backgrounds, families, and resources. So I decide to return for a night to St. Marys. This summer has been well over one hundred degrees on many days, and I have to admit I don't want to go, but I am curious to see how the shelter, and perhaps I, have changed. It is now mid-August, 1988 and the following is from my notes.

I got a late start out to the shelter tonight, and I didn't know where to get the bus. It was already getting dark. I thought about getting a cab, imagining how absurd a cab would look pulling up in front of the line of men at St. Mary's. But I realized I didn't even have the exact address of the shelter! What the hell was I doing!

Finally, swallowing my pride, I got on the next bus and just asked the driver where St. Marys shelter was. He said he'd tell me where to get off. I sat, looking out over the darkening city, and suddenly noticed how yuppie the city looks when you're going to a shelter. As we rode past familiar institutions, I was starting to feel alienated already.

Several men also got off when I did, all going to the shelter. A line a half a block long was already waiting at eight-fifteen and the women had already been allowed to go in. At the door I recognized the old Dutchman from last summer, wooden leg and all. He smiled and banged on the door with his metal cane for me. Someone said "the guy just came by here." The guy came back, and also Brother Tom and they let me in another door. I went straight through to the women's dorm. The Brothers' quarters were being remodeled—no air conditioning there this year. I wondered where they got the money and how they were managing?

I recognized Kathy right away. I was surprised she is still there, but it was really nice to see a friendly face. She announced she got married last month, so she usually does not stay all night anymore. She'd be leaving about nine-thirty at night. Elaine is a new volunteer-worker, a woman recently widowed from out-of-town who looks about seventy years old. But she smokes a lot and has lung problems, including frequent pneumonia, and has a curved and arthritic spine, so she evidently looks more frail than she is. She's been working here for about two months. She says her family thinks she's a little crazy. " My seven year old granddaughter talks about how grandma *can't* be a bag lady."

The talk this evening was all about Margaret who moved out this morning to her own apartment. She is the older woman I met last year who said "if I can just hang on until I qualify for Social Security." She moved in to Senior public housing. How exciting! Elaine said "I couldn't believe how much stuff she had. She kept hauling it out of her locker, from under her bed, from the dresser. How did she have all that in here? Garbage bags full. We used the van to get her moved. She is just thrilled. She invited me and Bob and one of the residents that helped her, to come back for coffee sometime. I'm gonna go and bring her

an old black and white TV I've been saving. We were all so happy for her."

Kathy assigned me a bed in the middle of the room, sort of in the path of one of the two big fans that draws air from one of the little windows in back. God, I thought, it's hotter than last year. This time I slept on one of the vinyl covered mattresses which are just awful because they make you sweat. Most of the beds are covered with plastic or vinyl. It's hard to place one's head so that your eyes are not assaulted by the various night lights. Elaine says the other night the generator emergency lights came on at three in the morning. I guess that caused quite a stir. I had a terrible time going to sleep tonight. The lights go out at nine, but that was only the beginning of the activity.

I noticed my bed rocked everytime Julie, who was on the other side of the divider (which was the end of her bed), rolled over. Shortly after I finally got to sleep, I was awakened by loud yells, "Ugh, ugh, ugh." Several people woke up, and a few got up to see what was the trouble. Jolene was crying and had a bad cramp in her leg. In the morning Elaine said that she had gotten up, and that Jolene had actually had a bad nightmare.

A number of faces looked familiar to me. The young white girl I met last year who was so angry is still there. She said casually, but with some pride, "I'm a volunteer at Voices for the Hungry now. I have to go over there at seven in the morning. I'm a cook." Elaine says that she has two kids, ages ten and eleven, and that now she is pregnant. Her boyfriend is still here staying on the men's side. She's not talking of leaving any more.

Franny, also in her mid fifties, was talking a long time to Elaine. She has been here only a week. She came from Arizona; says she quit her job as a cook at a nursing facility for the chronically mentally ill "because I didn't like how they treated the patients." She took a train up here to see a boyfriend. When that didn't turn into a place to stay, she asked around and found the shelter. She applied for three jobs yesterday, and will apply for more tomorrow. She doesn't consider herself homeless at all. She is resourceful, self-reliant, and critical of the others here who she says "don't even try to work."

It was laundry day again so in the morning I helped remove the sweat soaked sheets from all the beds, putting them in huge piles, tying them up in bundles. The laundry cart man came in at six-thirty, right on time. The temperature outside was already one-hundred degrees as Elaine and I left the building. We took a bus over to McDonalds to get coffee. We noticed several of "our ladies" shuffling into the shopping mall behind us.

### Notes

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1. The names of the city, shelter, and the persons I met have been changed, to protect their identities.

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