



A Capital-Gazette Newspaper — Annapolis, MD

Published Thanksgiving Day - November 22, 2007

Number of homeless kids in county rising

With some help, one brave family headed for success

By [ELISABETH HULETTE](#), Staff Writer

George Garrett and his wife had to sleep in a van during the icy winter weather. Meanwhile, their children slept in another family's home.

It was 27 degrees outside on the February day in 2006 when George Garrett brought his wife, Stanya, and three young children to the Light House shelter on West Street in Annapolis.

Mr. Garrett had lost his job at the post office because of complications from a disability, and Mrs. Garrett's day care work wasn't enough to keep them afloat.

"We struggled to make ends meet, and we just couldn't do it," Mr. Garrett said. The family was homeless in Baltimore for more than six months before they were referred to Light House, which is run by the Annapolis Area Ministries. Their first night in the shelter, Mr. Garrett said, was the most peaceful they'd had in a long time.

"I never thought I would be in this predicament," said Brandon, 11, Mr. Garrett's oldest son. The Garrett children are among a growing number of homeless children who are students in county schools.

According to the county school system, there were 274 homeless children enrolled during the 2004-05 school year. By the 2006-07 school year that number grew to 505.

Suzanne Zukauskas is the homeless liaison for county schools. She has counted 382 so far this school year and expects that number to grow far beyond last year's total.

"It should not be," said Eugene Peterson, a member of the county Board of Education. "We're the fifth-richest county in the state and the richest state in the union. There should not be one homeless child in Anne Arundel County or in the state of Maryland."

Some of the homeless children reside in emergency shelters with their families, while others stay with extended family or reside in motels or campgrounds, Ms. Zukauskas said.

Sometimes families are left homeless after a fire or flood, but increasingly, homelessness is caused by financial hardship made more difficult by the county's high cost of living, she said.

Marci Kennai, a director at the county's Department of Social Services, said she has seen more evictions recently.

Housing in the county is very expensive, Ms. Kennai said. "People who have minimum wage jobs can't afford rent, so they get behind and get evicted."

Often, people expect people who are homeless to be single, without children. But it's surprising to learn how many families struggle with homelessness, said Chris Poulsen, special programs manager in the county department of social services.

To help them understand, she said, "I often tell people, if you didn't have your next four paychecks, and no family to bail you out, where would you be?"

More people are getting turned away from local shelters each year.

Each November, county churches begin their Winter Relief program, taking weeklong turns setting up cots so the homeless can sleep indoors. When the program started up earlier this month, each bed within the churches and in the county's three homeless shelters was full.

"We had to say, 'We're really sorry, but we don't have any shelter beds,'" Ms. Kennai said. Sometimes, on very cold nights, her department is able to put up families in hotels, but there's only so much funding to go around.

Crystal Brownlee, managing director at Light House, said she's worried. She turned away 61 families with 110 children in 2006 and so far this year has already turned away 61 families with 115 children.

"It's not getting any better, that's the sad thing," she said. "You just think people are sleeping in cars."

For awhile, that's what Mr. Garrett was doing.

After he lost his job in Baltimore because of complications from a disability, "we struggled to make ends meet, and we just couldn't do it," Mr. Garrett said.

The family lived for six months with Mrs. Garrett's sister. When she got married and moved away, the children began sleeping at their grandmother's house while their parents slept in the family van.

A worker for Head Start in Baltimore, where Mr. and Mrs. Garrett volunteer on the board of directors, noticed that their youngest son, Cameron, was missing school.

The Department of Social Services in Baltimore wanted to send the children to different shelters, but the Garretts wouldn't break up their family.

After two months at Light House, the Garretts moved into a small, tan house with three bedrooms and a wide porch near the Boys & Girls Clubs of Annapolis and Anne Arundel County.

Called the Anchor House, the arrangement is part of a two-year transitional program run by Light House. The Garretts pay subsidized rent to Light House while the organization helps them get back on their feet.

The children - Cameron, 5, Staniya, 7, and Brandon - left the Catholic school in Baltimore they were attending on a scholarship, and enrolled at Germantown Elementary School.

Brandon said that transition was hard because he had to learn new rules and a different culture at his new school.

The county school system is required to help homeless children stay in their first school if they want to, Ms. Zukauskas said. Sometimes they are bused, and sometimes the school system sends them to school in a taxi.

Ms. Zukauskas has some funding to buy school supplies for homeless students, and she hopes to get vouchers to pay for school uniforms at schools that require them.

Even with the resources available to help, finding families that need that help can be difficult because many won't admit to their situation.

Mr. Peterson said that's a big part of the problem. "These folks many times are living in shadows. ... Many people have pride, and they won't admit how desperately they're hurting."

He commended a committee of local organizations headed up by County Executive John R. Leopold that is planning a "homeless resource day" for March 29. It'll be a sort of one-stop-shop for people to find out what resources are available to the homeless.

Other cities have held similar events, and the county's will be the first in Maryland, Mr. Leopold said.

"But what happens after that day?" Mr. Peterson asked. "What's going to be our continuing response to this?"

Meanwhile, the Garrett family is headed for success.

Brandon, Cameron and Staniya are adjusting. They joined a recreation league football team (Staniya is a cheerleader), and Brandon is in the Middle Years Programme at Annapolis Middle School.

Both parents are working on their associate degrees at Anne Arundel Community College - Mr. Garrett in human services and Mrs. Garrett in nursing. Last year, Mr. Garrett volunteered as a basketball coach at Germantown Elementary School.

They are formulating a plan for what to do when the family's stay at Anchor House ends in six months.

"We want to stay here (in the city)," Mr. Garrett said. "We like Annapolis because of the people." For information on services provided to the homeless or about the upcoming Homeless Resource Day, call the county Department of Social Services at 410-269-4460.

For more information on homelessness
in Anne Arundel County and the
services of the Light House, please
contact Marilyn Baker at 410-349-5056.