

LETTER TO ST. VINCENT DE PAUL PARISHIONERS ABOUT THE HOMELESS IN THE PARK

DEAR FELLOW PARISHIONERS,

About ten years ago, we acquired the church park. From the start, we have allowed homeless people to sleep there. Our park has become one of the most visible faces of homelessness in Baltimore City—and a reminder to the broader community of the inequities in society which many would prefer to sweep away. The parish is committed to a ministry to the homeless.

Current Situation

The parish has paid a dear price. We have relinquished our only green space, and we tolerate trash and crowds. We have been perplexed over the best course of action, and anguish over whether we are doing the right thing. Yet we are challenged to live our Christianity. With focused effort on the part of parishioners, in collaboration with the city, 20 people were housed from the park in 2008. Yet, this is only one-fifth of people who stayed in the park during that period. Recently, however, Baltimore Homeless Services decided to end its *Street to Home Initiative* in the park, and there will be no more housing slots allotted to the park.

There is no master plan for park management. We can argue that the most desperate homeless population is being offered an undisturbed haven for sleeping. We can continue to “muddle through,” though with little hope of improvement. There is reason to think that illegal activity witnessed in the park last year, such as drug dealing, gang activity, and prostitution may resume as the weather warms. Control over residents, donors, sanitation is limited at best. The City will offer only general outreach services to park residents. It is not entirely clear that our own volunteer effort to maintain a modicum of control is sustainable.

Housing for the Homeless

Last October, the parish Social Action Committee proposed to the Parish Council the idea of building some housing for the homeless in the park. The committee understands that the parish does not have the resources to build or administer housing for the homeless. If the Parish Council decides to move forward with our proposal, the committee will explore existing models and potential partners during the summer, keeping in mind the mission of the parish and the needs of the homeless population we attract. All the parish can contribute to the effort is the park property we own, probably through a long-term land-lease arrangement. The costs of construction and management must be borne by our partner.

If we are successful in identifying a partner to raise the funds for construction, we will serve a homeless population with service-enriched, subsidized, long-term housing. The choice of provider is key, assuring attractive, appropriate construction and good long-term management. With a building on site, the culture of the park would change. We

think we would be able to continue to serve the most vulnerable through this arrangement, but that will depend on the mission of the partner we select. If we cannot find a suitable partner, we will stop the initiative.

There are other hurdles as well: our partner finding sufficient funding, the Maryland Historical Trust approving construction plans, Archdiocesan and City approvals, and support from the Jonestown Planning Council, to name a few. The initiative could be stopped at many points, if it is thought that the project does not further our mission to the homeless.

Strong involvement by lay members of the parish community as a steering committee overseeing the project will be critical, to avoid putting additional demands on parish staff during planning and construction. We will negotiate with our partner a long-term management agreement for the park.

Many parishioners now working in the park feel committed to a more Christian and humane response than what we currently provide, and believe this is the best way forward to it. Preliminary discussions in the Parish Council have shown that there is a range of opinions on the proposal, so a process of community discernment is needed.

Next Steps

The issue at hand is simply: "Should the St. Vincent de Paul community consider the construction of housing for the homeless on its land?"

In order to bring the sense of the community into its deliberations, the Parish Council has decided on the following process:

- **Saturday, April 25 and Sunday, April 26**: Small informational sessions after each Mass in the Rectory Dining Room to be hosted by the Social Action Committee to answer questions and share thoughts.
- **Sunday, May 3**: Parish Town Meeting at 4:00–6:00 PM in the church to be conducted by the Parish Council.

Check the bulletin for further details, and please participate.

In Christ,

Members of the Social Action Committee