

Interviews

Rural Homelessness

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Interview with Sue Libarger

Anne Smetak

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Researcher: Anne Smetak

Event: Interview with Sue Libarger

Place: Salvation Army: 206 East Ohio Avenue

AS: This is Anne Smetak, it's 12/15/99 I'm here with Sue Libarger at Salvation Army. How long have you lived in the area?

SL: I have lived here since 1957.

AS: Always in Mt Vernon?

SL: Always in Mt Vernon, since '57. So I was, gonna date me, I think I was in 8th grade when I moved here.

AS: How long have you worked here?

SL: This is going on my fifth year.

AS: How did you get involved with the Salvation Army?

SL: Just answered an ad in the paper when they were looking for an Office Secretary, "Financial Assistant", more or less to do all the financial assistance here. And was interviewed by the officers who were here previous to these officers. And they were at the Salvation Army here in Mt. Vernon for about 11 years. And I interviewed with them and got the job. And I think it was about 6 mos I worked for them and then they left and were transferred on to another core. They went into Penn, and then we got our new officers here. And been working for them ever since.

AS: What exactly are your responsibilities here?

SL: I am volunteer coordinator, also secretary to the officers, I also do all the financial assistance and social work, I interview all the clients and determine what type of financial assistance that they are going to receive. I order all the food for our food pantry. And that is also another part of our financial assistance is giving out food. So, I am also in charge of that. There are a lot of other things on down that are too numerous to mention. But, when the officers aren't here I pretty much take care of things.

AS: What kind of services does the Salvation Army offer?

SL: We offer services to help clients with any type of utility prevention, shut off: water, gas,

electric. We will assist with rent. We assist with lodging if it happens to be transients coming through Mt Vernon. I'm on call 24hrs a day and we are notified through the sheriff's department. If somebody's coming through, has no place to stay, lost their money, someone's taken their money, they've had car breakdown, some sort of situation where they need lodging. We will lodge them. If we don't lodge them, than a lot of times Interchurch will do that. So we work very close and do a lot of networking with other agencies in the area. We also, like I said previously, give out food, assistance, we do that on three month basis. If somebody comes in, than they are eligible in three months to come back for food. But, there are exceptions to that rule. If somebody's had unexpected medical expenses, car repairs, and it's taken their food money, than they come in and talk with us and we determine that they absolutely have to have some assistance with food. And so that's kind of flexible according to each individual case. We do clothing votures to the thrift store here in Mt. Vernon, the salvation army thrift store. And I think that pretty well covers it. Oh, and also prescriptions. Somebody comes in and doesn't have the funds for medical prescriptions. And then a lot of times too, we also work with other agencies on that. Sometimes you're limited on the amount of money you can spend, medicines are expensive. And so I will call and talk with Rhonda at Interchurch. And between the two of us, sometimes we can get maybe more than what we could if I was just doing it on my own. So it's kind of nice to have the other agencies to work with. We work a lot with Freedom Center, veteran's services, Interchurch, department of Human Services, Moundbuilders and KnoHoCo, which is an agency on housing. So there's just a few of them that we work with.

AS: I've actually met with a few of those. I met with Linda just about a month ago.

SL: Did you? She's a really great gal, great to work with. She has a lot of limitations on how her money is dispersed and everything but she's always there when you need her. And very, very helpful. So we do a lot of referrals back and forth with that agency also.

AS: In your opinion as a community member, how large of a problem do you think rural homelessness is in this community?

SL: Rural homelessness is a lot more of a problem than what most people realize. You go into the urban areas and you see the homeless. You come into Mt Vernon and you don't see any homeless. So you just assume that there aren't any. And believe me there are. They're either sleeping in cars, we had a family that was in a tent, staying with a friend, and then eventually that friend gets upset, things don't work out and they are kicked out. We deal with a lot of families who are going through abusive situations. And if they aren't able to get into New Directions then we handle the case. So there's a lot more homelessness in Mount Vernon than what we realize. And like you say, even though you don't see the cardboard houses and the people sleeping in sleeping bags on the streets, you have them. I've had a couple reports of people sleeping in dumpsters in Mt. Vernon and behind some of the restaurants when it gets cold. So, it's there. It may not be a prevalent as what you see in the urban areas, but it is there.

AS: Do you think the community acknowledges it?

SL: I think a certain part of the community acknowledges it. But the Salvation Army is part of an Emergency needs coalition, and they are right now trying to get the city leaders to realize and

recognize the fact that there is a definite need for a shelter of some sort within Mt Vernon. We have, KnoHoCo has a house that they use as a shelter in the Fredericktown area. But when they move someone in, they move them in for a month to try to get them settled, looking for another place to move into, a place of their own. And lot's of time that place is not available for us. We need something that quick sometimes, and we don't have it. This ENC is working very hard to try and come up with a solution for this problem. And it's going to take a lot of funding, it's going to take a lot of time on someone's part, it's going to have to be a home or something within the city where you're going to have to have someone there constantly 24hrs a day in order to, you know have the door open for someone if we need the sheltering. It is a big expense to us, to lodge these people. Without a shelter, we have to put them in a motel. Now we do have a motel that gives special rates to the different agencies. But still it takes dollars away from being able to put that money someplace else. So it is more a concern than what people realize. And a lot of people just shake their head and say, well we don't have a homeless situation in Mt Vernon. Because most people here are, you know, average income and above and we don't... and you know, they just close their eyes to it.

AS: Do you think local government accepts that there is a homeless problem?

SL: I don't think they accept it as much as what we would like to see them accept it. I think that's why, we are working also with Interchurch to try and...they are going to try to get a large, like a town meeting set up. Where the agencies can come together with the town leaders and really discuss and talk about numbers and the problems that we are having with the homeless. So that's, that's somewhere in the not too near future that we're going to try and do that. Pretty soon anyway, we're hoping we can do that. Because I just don't think that they are aware of it. And we're trying to put the numbers together so that they can see what we're dealing with on a daily basis.

AS: Do you have an estimate of the number of homeless people served in Knox County

SL: Within a year? [Yes] Let's see, I have got some figures here on...in 1998, we gave financial assistance to 573 families. We lodged about 100 people. And when we lodge them that takes in a large area. So, people that are traveling through Mt. Vernon that have a breakdown or have an emergency or something like that, you can't really call them homeless, but they are in need and they need some sort of assistance. Total number of people we gave total financial assistance to in 1998 is over 2,000 people. You know when you see the numbers, it's just...I really cannot tell you exactly, as far as telling you how many homeless...maybe somewhere around...I think 100 is probably what we end up covering somewhere, that falls within that homelessness.

And that could be someone who's, like you say, living with somebody and they've kicked them out, and all of a sudden they're on the street, they don't have a place to go. So it's...and then people come in and say, I don't have my job, I've lost my job, I can't pay my rent. So one thing kind of leads to another. So it puts them into that homeless bracket that you sometimes don't think that you're ever going to be caught in. And they're there.

AS: How would you define rural homelessness?

SL: Well, it has a lot of different meanings to a lot of different people. And I understand that in

the urban areas the homeless people that live in the shelters are continually homeless from day to day. We have people here in Knox County who are fine one week, and next week they find they're without a home. They don't do the planning ahead. You know they can't see that you know, maybe 6mos on down the road I'm going to need a little bit of nest egg to put back. Hopefully I don't find myself in a bad situation like this. So homelessness in the rural area does not necessarily coincide with homelessness as what you would see in an urban area. I think it's on a very, a very quick, it's changing all the time. It's not a set pattern like you see in the urban areas where you have families that are homeless and staying in shelters. I think the rural areas are more based on jobs and what happens with your work. And the fact that, and you know maybe you have had terribly high medical bills, can't meet your bills, and your landlord kicks you out. So I think its totally different in rural areas, the definition of homelessness than what the urban areas are.

AS: Have you noticed any fluctuations in the number of homeless people you've dealt with in the past five years?

SL: Um-hum, an increase, a de-ionate increase. In fact an increase in everything. An increase in financial assistance all the way around. And I don't think you can base it on welfare. We just don't think it's welfare. It's new people moving into the area who think there might be jobs. It's people coming back to the area who have left and now they have family in the area they want to come back to and the jobs just aren't here, the real extra good paying jobs. You know, you have to commute to Mansfield or Columbus or someplace else like that to get your really good jobs. But there's a de-ionate increase. I see new cases coming in all the time, people we've never seen before, that are finding themselves in a real, real, mess and need some assistance one way or another.

AS: Are those people typically ones that have just moved into the area?

SL: It's just the culmination of everything. And we have had a meeting with other agencies in the area and Rhonda and everyone else in the other agencies are saying the same thing I'm saying. 'Can't put my finger and say it's this. Can't put my finger on this and say, that's the reason.' It's just not. We're seeing all sorts of reasons as to why they're coming in here for assistance. One lady for instance, the other day, her husband passed away within the last few months. And all of a sudden, she realized that she doesn't have the income. And she says, I have never, never had to go to an agency to ask for assistance. But she had to come in and ask us to help pay a bill. And she simply, she's looking into selling her home and moving into an assisted living place, but she doesn't have very much income at all. And if she doesn't do something like that, I'm going to see her back in here, because she's definitely going to have to have help again. She just doesn't have the income. So it's just a wide range of reasons why they're in here to see us.

AS: Do you think there are enough federal programs out there to help people like that?

SL: I think we've got a lot. And I think we have more than what a lot of people realize. And I know I have just learned within the last year or so of some federally funded programs along with some state-funded programs. We don't get the funds, we don't have the programs here, but other

agencies have the programs and I'm able to give them referrals, and they're able to help them. And one state-funded program is specifically to help singles and couples who don't have children. About everything that you see, most of the federal programs are based on families, either a single mother with children, or a husband with children, or a family, or you know, they've got children within their home. You see a lot of people come in here who don't have, you know, I'm a single person and there's nothing out there for me. So there are some state programs that are seeing that there is a need for that.

I just had a gentleman on the phone just a short time ago. He needs to get some steel-toed work boots for his job that he's taking, a new job. And he has such a small foot that he can't find the shoes to fit him. And in order to have them made, they're \$400 a pair. And he said he reported to his job, and his employer said, do you have steel-toed boots on. And he says no, I can't find em to fit me. And he says, you'll have to have them in order to work at this job. And it's a pretty good paying job. He has been working at McDonald's and Wendy's and places like this till he found something. And now here he is in a situation where he as found a good-paying job, doesn't have the funds to buy this \$400 pair of boots for himself. So I did some referrals and some checking around referred him to a couple of places where I think the state funding or programs for people who don't have children, and his wife does work, she's a nurses aid, works at a nursing home. So it's not like they're...they're part of the working poor that we have within our community.

AS: What would you change about the way Knox County deals with homelessness?

SL: Well, I would definitely have a shelter of some sort for people. And if you had to have a separate shelter for singles, and a shelter for families, women with children. I mean what breaks my hearts is seeing a mother come in here and somebody's kicked her out and she has small children. And you know, to no fault of theirs, they're without a place to stay or a warm place to sleep. I really would like to see Mt Vernon get some sort of homeless shelter, and within Knox county. It's a definite need. And it's a need that's been put off for too long. And it's not going to get better. The situation's going to get worse I think, before it ever gets better. So I think it's something that really needs to be done.

AS: Do you see that happening in the next few years.

SL: Oh....[sighs]...I'm going to be optimistic and say I hope so.

AS: How would you answer the critic who thinks that a homeless shelter in the county would only serve as a draw to others?

SL: Well, I'm sure there will be certain people that would probably take advantage of something like that. It would have to be regulated on a very strict type of rules, set rules to avoid something like that. But I do think that...I'm not sure whether people would think that it would draw homelessness. I don't think the house, or the home wherever they get it's going to have a big sign outside that says, you know, this is a homeless shelter, please enter here. I would hope that they wouldn't feel that way, I would hope it would be done with a type of scheduling and certain terms that everyone had to deal with that it wouldn't come to that.

AS: Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think would be important for me to know?

SL: No, I don't think so. I think you've done a pretty good job of covering everything. No, it's just that our agencies continue to need funding and hopefully...you know you hope that you'll never ever have to have this, but the bible says there's always going to be the poor. So I guess we're here to help the ones who are poor and the low-income people that are out there and are continually going to need some assistance that just for some reason or other aren't able to manage finances on their own and don't know how to handle that dollar. So, I guess we're here to help them as much as we can.

AS: Thank you very much.