

Homeless overflow shelter in Wichita already busy

By STAN FINGER
The Wichita Eagle

WICHITA — Michael recalled spending Sunday night under a Wichita bridge. "I don't want to say," he said when asked which bridge. "But it was warm."

Monday, the 50-year-old was at the Warming Souls Winter Overflow Shelter, which already is filling beds faster than expected.

Organizers expected 15 or 20 people Sunday, the shelter's opening night for the year at St. Paul's United Methodist Church. There were 36.

"And the weather was not that cold last night," Sandy Swank, director of Inter-Faith Ministries, said Monday.

The man who identified himself as Michael said his friends call him George because he boasts of being a descendant of George Washington and England's King George. He showed up at the overflow shelter Monday night but said he was prepared if it didn't have room.

"I've got this sleeping bag good for 10-to-20 below, so I'm good," he said.

The shelter will be open through the end of March, rotating on a monthly basis among a handful of downtown churches.

"We've been getting a lot of calls," Swank said. "Everyone was looking for a place to stay. People were asking when it was going to be open."

The shelter averaged 72 people a night last winter, and that number jumped to 130 on especially cold nights, said Janis Cox, co-chairwoman of Advocates to End Chronic Homelessness.

Nobody knows what the numbers will be like this winter, given the high unemployment and sluggish local economy. But the trends are troubling, local service providers for the poor and homeless say.

"The last 10 months, our numbers have just been incredible," said Wendy Glick, director of the Lord's Diner, which offers a free meal to anyone who wants one every night. "We're seeing a lot more women, a

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lot more families with children."

The Warming Souls shelter has designated separate spaces for single men, women and families.

Last year, 80 women used the overflow shelter — more than 20 percent of the 373 people who spent at least one night. All but four of those had been homeless for at least a year.

"We were shocked that there were that many women," Cox said. "It says to me that there are a lot of women out there who probably are taking refuge in situations ... that aren't ideal."

Six of the 36 people at the shelter Sunday night were women, Swank said.

Those using the shelter get tickets at United Methodist Open Door, about a dozen blocks away, during the day, and drivers bring people to the shelter during the evening.

Swank said the ticket keeps people from lining up all day waiting for the shelter to open.

Michael said he spends his day at a seniors center then goes to Open Door around 7 p.m. to catch a ride to the shelter.

Once there, he received a hot dog, chips, beans and a brownie — a dinner prepared by members of Woodland United Methodist Church.

"We're doing this two dates this month, tonight and at the end of the month," said Randy Roths, a church member. "We do it every year."

Roths said he tries to spend the evening talking to those who come to the shelter, getting to know them.

"I work the crowd," he said. "I try to be more than a nobody handing them something."

Robert Briggs, 37, had been collecting plastic bottles and cups during the day and hoped to fill them

with orange drink in one dispenser at the shelter.

"That way, I have something to drink all day tomorrow," he said as he spread a red, white and blue crocheted blanket over one of 47 cots in the church gymnasium.

Working through various agencies and programs, Cox said, Advocates to End Chronic Homelessness was able to place 166 homeless people in permanent housing this year.

"It's hard to say whether there's other people coming along to replace them" at the overflow shelter, Cox said. "We're just real curious about what our numbers are going to be like this year."

Long-range weather forecasts vary, but most suggest it will be a fairly typical winter for Wichita, with slightly warmer-than-normal temperatures.

But even temperatures in the 40s can prove dangerous for the homeless if it's damp with a brisk wind, Swank said.

"People don't realize the long-term effects of it," she said. "People say, 'It's the same people over and over again, isn't it?' No, actually it isn't. After four or five years, they eventually die because it's very hard physically on them to be out."

Advocates to End Chronic Homelessness raised private funding for the shelter.

Along with St. Paul's, churches providing space for the overflow shelter will be First Metropolitan Community Church, First United Methodist Church, St. John's Episcopal and St. Mary's Cathedral.

The shelter will be at the community room of Inter-Faith Ministries at the end of March.

International News

European court says no to crucifixes in Italian schools

ROME (AP) — Europe's court of human rights said Tuesday the display of crucifixes in Italian public schools violates religious and education freedoms, prompting an angry reaction from the Catholic Church and government officials in Rome.

The ruling could force a review of the use of religious symbols in government-run schools across Europe. Saying the crucifix could be disturbing to non-Christian or atheist pupils, the court rejected arguments by Italy's government that it was a national symbol of culture, history, identity, tolerance and secularism.

The Italian government immediately said it would appeal, with one minister saying the court should be ashamed and a conservative senator calling the ruling "absurd." Italian bishops said they were perplexed by the decision from the Strasbourg-based court.

"The multiple significance of the crucifix, which is not just a religious symbol but a cultural sign, has been either ignored or overlooked," the Italian Bishop's Conference said in a statement.

The court ordered the government to pay a euro5,000 (\$7,390) fine to Soile Lautsi, the mother of two children who claimed public schools in her northern Italian town refused eight years ago to remove the Roman Catholic symbols from classrooms.

The seven-judge panel, however, stopped short of ordering Italy to remove the crucifixes, which are common in Italian public schools. The ruling can still be appealed to the European Court of Human Rights' Grand Chamber of 17 judges, whose decisions are binding.

China sentences gang 'godmother'

BEIJING (AP) — Dubbed the "godmother" of the Chinese underworld, she was notorious for her toughness and a lavish lifestyle that reportedly included luxury villas and a stable of 16 young lovers.

Her criminal reign ended Tuesday when Xie Caiping, 46, was sentenced to 18 years in prison for running illegal casinos and bribing government officials. Her trial was one of a series of gang prosecutions in the southwestern city of Chongqing that have featured lurid testimony about sex, corruption and the violent underworld.

Xie is the only female gang boss to be tried as part of a monthslong crackdown on local gangs, known as "black societies," in the sprawling southwestern megacity of 30 million. The trials have exposed the tangled web of links between government officials and police officers who sought to provide cover for the crime syndicates.

Besides her luxury homes, Xie reportedly enjoyed her own Mercedes-Benz and "retained 16 young men for personal entertainment," local media reported. On Tuesday, her driver Luo Xuan, 29, who was also her lover, was sentenced to four-and-a-half years in jail for his role.

Xie had been protected for years because she was the sister-in-law of the city's long-serving deputy police chief, Wen Qiang, who was detained for investigation by the ruling Communist Party in August. Wen, who is regarded as being at the heart of an extensive network of protection of local gangs for over a decade, will go on trial later in the month.

Xie once absconded with a suitcase full of money after being tipped off by Wen before a police raid on one of her gambling dens, according to a local newspaper. Last year, she hired gang members to beat an undercover police officer unconscious, put him in a bag and dump him in the countryside.

Kansas, Washington back Boeing for tanker contract

By The Associated Press

TOPEKA — With hundreds of new jobs at stake, Kansas officials are keeping an eye on the competition for an Air Force contract to build a new refueling plane.

Chicago-based Boeing Co., which has a plant in Wichita, is competing with

Los Angeles-based Northrop Grumman Corp. and Airbus parent European Aeronautic Defense and Space Co. for the \$35 billion contract to build new air refuelers and replace the Air Force's aging fleet of 179 tankers.

Northrop and Airbus are offering a tanker based

on the Airbus A330. Boeing may offer tankers based on its 767 or 777 jets or both.

Kansas Gov. Mark Parkinson met this summer with the secretary of the Air Force to discuss military issues in the state, including the tanker project. Parkinson said Monday he

and former Gov. Kathleen Sebelius' administration have been strong supporters of Boeing's bid.

"I will continue to work with Boeing and our Congressional delegation as they focus on ways to bring this important project to Kansas," Parkinson said.

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