



## Archdiocese

### **Marin churches push for year-round homeless shelter**

May 10th, 2016

By Lidia Wasowicz

Eight years ago, as frost covered the ground and hypothermia cases crowded the emergency room, the now defunct Vineyard Christian Fellowship of San Rafael set up a makeshift sanctuary to bring some of Marin County's homeless in from the cold.

Tired of waiting for that stopgap to gain a fixed footing, a network of faith communities that over the years expanded the effort is pushing for a permanent shelter for men and women who have none.

Under the auspices of the nonprofit Marin Organizing Committee, five Catholic parishes and other churches, synagogues and nonprofits are gathering signatures to sway political will in favor of a year-round, single location for the Rotating Emergency Shelter Team known as REST, which currently offers 40 men and 20 women dinner, conversation and overnight accommodation Nov. 1 to May 1.

While the women eat and sleep at the county-owned Health and Wellness Campus in San Rafael, the men hop aboard buses that carry them – along with bedding and other paraphernalia – to a different site every night and pick them up early the next morning.

Last season, the stops included 17 fellowship halls spread throughout the county.

The nightly rotations and daily storage of equipment present a logistical nightmare, said Suzanne Walker, deputy director of St. Vincent de Paul Society of Marin County, which transports the guests after screening them for safety and sobriety.

In addition to the 17 host congregations, 40 assisted by sending volunteers.

Ruth Ann Cowley, program head at St. Hilary in Tiburon, recalled the “joyful” overflow of helpers even on Thanksgiving and Christmas Day.

“The Holy Father’s focus on being of service to the most vulnerable has helped galvanize people here into reaching beyond their comfort zone,” said pastor, Father William Brown.

In total, 2,000 adults and students from St. Hilary, St. Anselm in Ross, St. Rita in Fairfax, St. Raphael in San

Rafael, Our Lady of Loretto in Novato and 52 other groups presented 20,000 meals plus their companionship to 102 women and 294 men.

At last count, 2015 figures showed 1,300 homeless in one of America's most affluent counties.

The 60 emergency beds sought by supporters would increase by a third the 179 now available through Homeward Bound, which operates Marin's two homeless shelters.

"I think a permanent center is long overdue," said Leticia Fish, director of the Monday night shelter and dinner program for four years and parishioner for 39 at St. Rita, a participant from the early days of REST, when it operated Dec. 15 to March 15. "We are one of the last counties and the richest that does not have a center in the Bay Area. It is shameful!"

The advocates hope to collect 6,000 signatures before the June 7 elections when three of five Board of Supervisors seats are up for grabs.

While it does not endorse candidates, "we do support issues," said Gail Dorph, a MOC leader and member of Congregation Kol Shofar in Tiburon.

The petitions will demonstrate to those in and running for office the public's support for a permanent shelter, said Anna Eng, lead organizer with MOC and its parent, the Bay Area chapter of the Industrial Areas Foundation, the nation's oldest and largest network of community organizers.

"I think it is a matter of justice that there is a permanent, yearlong home for REST," said Pat Langley, a leader in REST, MOC and St. Anselm, where she has been a parishioner for 35 years.

The affluence and generosity of many residents provide Marin with "the perfect opportunity to create a model program of care and rehabilitation services for those most in need," said Beth Haran, in charge of feeding the hungry at St. Raphael, her parish since 1952, which sends volunteers each Friday to cook for and eat with the REST women.

Parochial vicar Father Roger Gustafson said he launched the signature drive at St. Hilary as a concrete example of social justice, which many Catholics fail to differentiate from charity even though the church calls for both.

*From May 12, 2016 issue of Catholic San Francisco.*