

Homeless families: More than the city can serve

How many homeless people are there in San Francisco? How many families are homeless? It's impossible, it seems, to get firm answers.

If you check around, you'll get widely divergent figures. More likely, you'll get answers about why the figures are so elusive. Still . . .

According to the April 20, 2001, minutes of a special meeting of the San Francisco Local Homeless Coordinating Board Funding Committee, a public program, "The Committee agreed to use 12,500 as the number of homeless people in San Francisco. This figure has been used in the HUD application for the last two years."

The Mayor's Office on Homelessness' annual one-night count — this year's was on Thursday, Oct. 25 — came up with 7,305 people, a 36% increase from fall 2000. By far, the largest numbers were in District 6.

And what is "homelessness"? The S.F. Department of Public Health defines it as sleeping on the street, in a vehicle or in a "makeshift structure not authorized or fit for habitation" — conditions that would seem to lend themselves to being quantified. Unless you're talking about an adult with a child who tries not to be noticed, fearing Child Protective Services might take the child away, citing neglect.

"I've known families to ride in a bus all night to

avoid being seen," says Salvador Menjivar, executive director of the Hamilton Family Center, which operates four programs for homeless families.

Public Health also extends homelessness to SRO occupants who don't have tenancy rights and formerly homeless people who are hospitalized or in jail, halfway houses, temporary shelters or transitional housing. In the mayor's office's Oct. 25 count, these "non-street" homeless accounted for more than half the 7,305 people.

The homeless also may include people doubled up in apartments or houses meant for fewer people, unless they're living with parents or children. Menjivar says he regularly hears of groups of unrelated families jammed into small apartments who often find themselves out on the streets when the landlord gives the original leaseholders a warning: Kick out the extra occupants or risk eviction.

James Tracy at the Coalition on Homelessness says 12 years ago you could count heads on the street to get the number of homeless, but now they include "sofa surfers," people in low-wage jobs or people just trying to lie low. "I see parents bundling kids off to school after camping in their cars and folks coming in to access services in security guard uniforms," says Tracy.

Adds Maureen Davidson, S.F. Department of Human Services public information officer, "What [statistics] won't find is people living in Uncle Ernie's living room."

The number of San Francisco homeless may just be impossible to get considering all the ways in which homelessness manifests itself, says DHS' Cindy Ward, "but what we do know is that all the time, every night, all the beds are full, and there's always a long waiting list to get into these shelters."

The night of the mayor's office count, the three city-funded family shelters were full with a total of 228 men, women and children, about 80 families. Connecting Point had another 411 people, about 135 families, on its waiting list.

Only the privately funded Raphael House seemed not at capacity: Its 50 beds can accommodate 17 families, but that night only six men, six women and 15 children were staying there. "Those numbers are accurate," says Program Director Peter Wright. "We'd just reopened after being shut down for both retrofitting and our every-three-years cleaning. It reflects our getting back online." The rest of the time? "Always filled," he says.

— By Karen Oberdorfer and Marjorie Beggs

idents can pick up their mail.

A blonde woman, her face flushed, boards the elevator. She greets Menjivar excitedly, telling him she is moving out to her own place that day. He congratulates her. He later explains that getting a family a permanent place to live is an elaborate process that often involves helping to repair bad credit and convincing landlords to give the families a chance.

"As you may imagine, the families we're helping are very, very poor and they often have bad credit reports," he says.

The shelter's Housing Program holds a weekly family-finance clinic that is mandatory for at least one adult member of each family.

Typical day at the shelter

Johnson's days at the shelter often started at a 6 a.m. breakfast with the other families. Three hours later the kids would go off to school, and Johnson would begin her day as a cashier at McDonald's. John-

son says Menjivar.

Activities for kids fill afternoons at the shelter. There's a day care program for toddlers, and after-school programs for elementary school kids and high school teens. Johnson says her children loved the art and reading programs.

In the toddler room, the furniture is natural wood rather than painted bright colors, Menjivar says. "Most of the children here are overstimulated from their circumstances, shuttling them from place to place when they were homeless."

In the Children's Program on the fourth floor is a good-sized TV set, a boom box, lots of books, chairs and stacks of Lego like toys. On one wall, a mural painted by the kids depicts a blue river winding through leafy trees.

All the families must be back in the shelter by 8 p.m. unless they have permission to stay out later. At night there are meetings, including one

where you have 40 different households."

The relationship with the shelter doesn't end when a family moves into their own place. The first three months, when they can easily slip up, are crucial, says Menjivar. For a year after a family leaves, a shelter social worker shows up at their door every month.

Visit from case worker

Tonja Sagun, Johnson's caseworker during her family's five-month stay at the shelter, visits after their first month out. Johnson greets Sagun, they hug warmly and joke a little but have tears in their eyes.

She and Johnson reminisce about Johnson's favorite memory at the shelter. It was on Mother's Day. The shelter treated all the mothers to an evening at the Sir Francis Drake Starlight Room, which has a spectacular vista of the city all lit up.

"If your spirit was down, that lifted it," exclaims Johnson. She smiles and looks down at her slippers as she recalls shyly that she even got a makeover that night.

Hamilton Residence serves meals on the top floor: the fourth. There's an industrial-strength kitchen and 41-seat dining room. The number of diners necessitates three seatings for each meal; dinner runs from 5 p.m. to 7:30 or so. Sliding glass doors open up to a rooftop patio. On nice days, families can eat outside. The view is mostly of backs of brick buildings, but off to the southwest, City Hall gleams in the sunlight.

Johnson still has daily reminders of her former life. She says she and her family were among the first homeless squatters in the metal shop junkyard just down the street from their new-found home. She still sees some people she met there. "There, but for the grace of God. . ."

"When I get up and go out the door — every day's a first for me. I'm dealing with the real world now," she says.

Just like the silver moons and stars on her slippers, Johnson is wishing on stars planted firmly on the ground: "It's to be the best parent I can be." ■



The families' bedrooms feature bunk beds as an efficient way to accommodate more people.

son quit crack five years ago and also went to Narcotics Anonymous meetings. "I'll always be an addict. I'm not going to lie, every day's a fight for me," she says.

The families are often out on activities during the daytime, and Menjivar credits much of the work of rehabilitation to other nonprofits. "We collaborate with other groups, such as St. Anthony, Goodwill and Arriba Juntos for job training and help with resumes,"

that is mandatory for families to share their experiences at the shelter. Johnson said those meetings were helpful.

The shelter counselors understand the families well, Johnson says. "You could tell they'd walked it and talked it." Indeed, 25% of the shelter staff have been homeless themselves.

Social workers are on hand round-the-clock. "We probably have a high incidence of problems," says Menjivar, "but I think it's the same that happens in any apartment building

The families' main connection Ins and outs of finding shelter

Four shelters in San Francisco take in homeless families for up to six months, long enough to give them a shot at moving out on their own. But families can't apply to these short-term housing programs directly. Instead, they have to phone Connecting Point, which coordinates placements in the four facilities, to get on the waiting list.

Established in 1995 as an offshoot of Compass Community Services (formerly Traveler's Aid), Connecting Point directs families to the ever-shifting vacancies at the shelters: St. Joseph's Village, which can accommodate 17 families; Compass Family Center, 24 families; Raphael House, 17 families; and Hamilton Family Residence, 40 families. Combined, their 355 beds house about 100 families.

They all wouldn't approve of being characterized as a shelter — which suggests crisis housing for a night or a few. Hamilton exec Salvador Menjivar points out that's why they called the in program on Golden Gate a "family residence," not to be confused with Hamilton's emergency family shelter in the Haight. This is short-term supportive housing, and the placement process always begins at Connecting Point.

When a family calls, a Connecting Point staff member does a preliminary assessment on the phone. After a second, more thorough, interview at the Connecting Point office, the family's name goes onto a master waiting list.

Funded by HUD and the S.F. Health Department, Connecting Point offers services to families waiting to get into shelters: emergency supplies, such as canned food, toiletries and clothes; referrals to drug-cessation services, counseling, housing, job assistance and other support programs; a computer with an Internet connection to write resumes and search for housing; and a phone for families to follow through on housing and job leads.

In fiscal 2000, Connecting Point served 1,060 families. According to its interim program director, who asked that her name not be used, families seem to

have little trouble finding Connecting Point because it's well-known throughout the city — by all public and private social services providers, police, drop-in centers and others.

Many families mistakenly believe that Connecting Point has "the key to all the services and it's up to us whether we unlock it," says the interim program director. But that's not true. The service is a thoroughfare, she says, not the destination.

Another misconception, she says, is that Connecting Point can get families into permanent housing. The four shelters do help their clients reach that goal, but sometimes the six-month limit on shelter stays isn't long enough to stabilize a family. A family that hasn't found housing in that time must resign on the master list and go through the whole process again. Connecting Point's stats show that 12% of the families return for shelter, and 9% come back a third time.

Connecting Point doesn't coordinate placements at Hamilton Family Emergency Center, San Francisco's only 24-hour emergency shelter that takes in families for overnight stays. To get on a list for space there, a family must call 663-2354 at 11 a.m.

Connecting Point also doesn't coordinate placements in transitional housing programs for homeless families, which provide stays of up to two years. In addition to Hamilton Family Center's 20-apartment transitional program, Catholic Charities has 13 apartments at its Richmond Hills Family Center, and Compass Community Services has 13 apartments at Clara House.

But to get into transitional housing, families must be referred by another shelter, a case manager or other service such as drug-cessation. The programs are designed to work on the root problems of homelessness, and the families must make a commitment to attend meetings, trainings and work together as a community.

— By Karen Oberdorfer

Connecting Point, 942 Market, (888) 811-SAFE