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Over 50 and on the streets

By Michael Neary

When Rev. Sanja Stinson noticed a rise in the population of people older than 50 seeking services at Matthew House, 3722 S. Indiana Ave., she knew she had a problem. The network of services for people in that age group, she had discovered, tended to be slimmer than for those older or younger. "These two came to me and said, 'Rev.

Stinson, I'm over 50, what am I going to do?'" said Stinson, the program director at Matthew House. She pointed out the two men sitting at an adjacent table. "And I said, 'You know what? I don't know.'" A look at the records revealed that the two men were part of a swelling phenomenon. In the early 1990s, Stinson said, 10 percent of the people who sought services at Matthew House were older than 50. But in 2004, half of those who sought services at Matthew House were older than 50. Matthew House, a daytime support service center, was founded in 1992 by Derrick D. Stinson, Rev. Sanja Stinson's husband. Stinson brought her observations to the Partnership to End Homelessness, of which she was a founding member. Along with similar observations from other agencies, Stinson's finding set in motion a study, conducted by the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness (Formerly the Partnership) and Loyola University Chicago's Center for Urban Research and Learning.



The study is called Homeless Over 50: The Graying of Chicago's Homeless Population, and its conclusions confirm the trend Stinson noticed. Researchers found a 26 percent increase in people ages 50 to 65 seeking services from "a broad range of service agencies" between 2001 and 2006.

Stinson noted cuts in General Assistance for unemployed single men and women as

a key reason for the increase. Reggie Harden, the program director at Matthew House, said the relocation of residents by the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) also resulted in more people seeking services - particularly older residents out of work who had been staying with friends or relatives, and who were consequently ineligible for help from CHA to relocate.

"A lot of them were living in CHA, doubling up," said Harden. "...they were not on CHA leases." The CHA's "Plan for Transformation," which includes moving public housing residents into new mixed-income apartment buildings, began about 10 years ago.

One tough hurdle faced by older people seeking work is not only ineligibility for services, but also the unwillingness of employers to hire them, according to those close to the scene. "At a certain point employers aren't expecting someone to go through a career change," said Betsy Carlson, program director at Lincoln Park Community Shelter. "It's just a little bit of a harder sell."

"They really don't want to give you a job outside if you're 50," added Charles Thompson, the lead case manager in social services for Matthew House. "... They're looking to get that 25 years out of you. They're looking for a long-term person in that particular spot."

Suddenly homeless

In a crumbling economy, unemployment is descending upon people who have never had to shoulder it before. A woman staying at Lincoln Park Community Shelter described her experience, in October 2006, of losing a technical support job she'd held in a communications company.

"I walked in this one day and they'd closed the entire department," said the woman, who asked to remain anonymous. "Twenty-two of us lost our jobs that day." She held on to her condominium until this past April. No longer able to make payments, she lost the condominium and was preparing to sleep in her car when a job counselor told her about the Lincoln Park shelter.



Residents at the Lincoln Park shelter stay an average of about 3 1/2 months, according to Carlson. They do not face a deadline by which they need to move out.

The shelter contains 24 beds for men and 11 beds for women - and there's a waiting list for admission. Carlson said the list's length constantly fluctuates, and she added that people who want to stay should call the shelter to find out how long the wait might be. The woman was pleased to find the shelter, but she said help for people her Age was sparse.

"I'm too old to be young and too young to be old," said the 57-year-old woman. Resources, she said, generally came with a condition she did not meet, such as being at least 60 years old, having an addiction that required treatment or having children. For a single woman in her 50s

and suddenly out of work, she found the options to be limited.

After two years of virtual unemployment, punctuated only by a six-month temporary position, she now says she has found a good job. For another resident at the Lincoln Park shelter, a cluster of events led him to homelessness: divorce, job loss and a broken-down car.

"If any of those three things had not happened, I would not have ended up homeless," said the man, 54, who also declined to give his name.

Many people dwell in such a precarious financial zone, according to a Nancy Rudner, chief executive officer of the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness.

"It takes on thing to push them off the edge into homelessness", she said.

Tight resources

Once people in this age group do find themselves homeless, resources may indeed be scarcer than they are for other age groups. People younger than 48 can use a program called Earnfare, sponsored by the Illinois Department of Human Services, (IDHS) to find employment. But the Homeless Over 50 study notes that because people 48 and older do not have to work to receive food stamps, IDHS gives first preference for Earnfare jobs to those under age 48 - in other words, to those who could not receive food stamps if they were not working.

That means people 48 and older generally cannot take advantage of Earnfare to forge connections with employers, the study explains. It's a problem noted by several of the clients at Matthew House.

Other regulations make it hard for people in this age group to receive services, as well. One of the policy proposals of the Homeless Over 50 study is to integrate senior programs and the homeless system. But that is not always possible, since the Older Americans Act can only provide funding for people 60 and older.



Paula Baste, the regional director of the Northeast (Levy) Senior Center, said she welcomes the homeless population and opens the Center to anyone who'd like to come in for a meal. But she said funding restrictions make more extensive resources tougher to provide to people younger than 60.

"Somewhat, our hands are tied for the folks under 60," she said.

Rudner noted that advocates can work to change such laws, but she said they can also uncover resources that do exist. Christine George, a principle investigator in the Homeless Over 50 Study, noted the federal Senior Community Service Employment Program as a valuable resource; it serves people 55 and older. Carlson said the Lincoln Park shelter refers clients to the Senior Aid Program, run by Jewish Vocational Services in Chicago. Advocates cite other programs, as well.

Fighting public perception

As several people older than 50 described their experiences, they noted a problem that had little to do with age. They expressed concern - sometimes regarding media portrayals - about stereotypes surrounding homeless people. A 58-year old woman in the Lincoln Park shelter said she had a bachelor of arts degree in sociology with a psychology minor and hours of coursework toward a certification in alcohol and addiction counseling.

Her odyssey into the shelter included what she described as an unjust eviction, for financial reasons, from an apartment about two decades ago. She later took care of her mother until her mother's death and then lived with a relative before coming to the Lincoln Park shelter in June - a move she said "terrified" her. Now, grateful to have a place to stay, she said she is working to emerge as swiftly as she can.

"You just have to navigate yourself and stay out of anything that isn't productive," she said. "This is not a spa - I am here to get myself back on track and do the things I need to do." At Matthew House, people talked about the deep need for respect that is often not met in the community at large.

"I'm homeless but I don't have to act like I'm homeless - or be treated like I'm homeless," said Gregory Griffin, 55. "When we leave here, and this is my experience, we get treated just like we're homeless."

Several of the others agreed with Griffin about the respect received at Matthew House, but often not outside of those walls. Clients also talked about the need for more jobs and the obstacles that can stand between them and obtaining work.

Stinson mentioned a number of employment-hindering factors that clients at Matthew House sometimes face: ex-offender status, disabilities and past unemployment.

"They're basically African American males," she added, motioning toward the men sitting at the table. "I'm going to put it on the table."

Health trouble and injuries have also taken tolls on the older homeless population. Christa Stauder, a case manager at Deborah's Place, is working with 52-year-old resident Mary Ann Burkiet to find employment and to obtain disability assistance in the wake of an accident.

"At this point it has to do with age," said Stauder... "The older you get, the harder it is to find the energy to find a job."

Chance and generosity

Help has sometimes emerged unexpectedly for people grappling with homelessness, in ways that range from the heart-wrenching to the bizarre. The 57-year-old woman staying at the Lincoln Park shelter recalled two spots of kindness after she lost her job.

During a medical appointment, the doctor left the room and returned with an envelope. When

she opened it, she discovered \$250 in food certificates and \$250 in gas cards.

"I just sat in my car and cried," she said. "I just couldn't stop crying - I was so overwhelmed with her kindness."

Later she received \$150 from a priest.

For the 54-year old man staying at the Lincoln Park shelter, a financial break came in a stranger way, and from a more massive source.

"I was walking through Wrigleyville and a pretty gal came up to me with a yellow handbill and handed it to me," he said. He glanced at the print just as he was about to toss it into the garbage and discovered an invitation to try out for a part as an extra in the Warner Brothers' film, *The Dark Knight*. He snagged the part, playing a hospital patient dodging falling debris.

That adventure won him three days of work for \$320.

But such chance events do not replace a firmer network of support services for homeless people who are older than 50, yet not eligible for Social Security or senior housing. As Radner said, "More people are finding a lack of a safety net."

For an aging population to emerge from homelessness, say those close to the problem, people need access to something more stable than the kindness of strangers or the bounty of very large film companies.