

Affluent freeze out homeless



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Rev. Stephen Kirkegaard of St. Aidan's Anglican Church in the Beach hopes a meeting scheduled for Jan. 16 will bring about community support for a once-a-week shelter run by the Out of the Cold program. Twelve homeless people would benefit.

Beach residents threaten legal action to stop church's plans for a once-a-week 'Out of the Cold' drop-in centre

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A Toronto church's plan to feed and house 12 homeless people one night a week during the worst of the winter has been put on hold after residents of a tony Beach enclave threatened it with a legal injunction.

As part of the Out of the Cold program, which is run in churches and synagogues across Toronto, the temporary shelter was to have opened Jan. 8 at St. Aidan's Anglican Church on Silver Birch Ave., at Queen St. E.

But the three-month program has been delayed until at least Jan. 16, when a community meeting will be held to discuss details and other potential sites.

Rev. Stephen Kirkegaard, a priest at St. Aidan's, invoked the Christmas story to describe the motivations behind the shelter proposal.

"There's the story of Mary, Joseph and Jesus, and there wasn't any room for them at the inn – they were homeless in Bethlehem," Kirkegaard said.

"Fortunately they were given some shelter that night. So for Christians, it's pretty clear that we're called to reach out to people who are at risk because they don't have shelter."

Kirkegaard said the program was "very modest in its scope" and was to have housed both men and women on Monday nights over a 12-week period.

"If anyone is scared, there is really nothing to be scared of," he said. "And if all we do is save the life of one person, well, that modest project made a big difference."

Out of the Cold has been operating in Toronto since 1987. It sprang from the efforts of Toronto social activist Sister Susan Moran and the students at St. Michael's College School, who had tried to help a homeless man they had befriended.

That homeless man died, but the idea to feed and shelter the homeless grew into a city-wide effort that today has 20 faith organizations, opening their doors one day a week for 23 weeks in the coldest part of winter to provide food, a bed and hospitality. The program is funded by the city but relies on volunteers to make it work.

And it's not just downtown churches that participate. Churches and synagogues across the city provide 120 beds a night, seven days a week. On any given night, there are three or four Out of the Cold programs being held, including in some of the city's more posh neighbourhoods, like Cedarvale and Forest Hill.

This is the 11th year Holy Blossom Synagogue has been opening its doors to the homeless, serving 114 for dinner and offering beds for as many as 45.

Initially, many neighbours in the upscale Bathurst neighbourhood were worried about the Out of the Cold program being so close by. At first, there was a certain amount of "NIMBYism" or "not in my backyard" syndrome, said Phyllis Denaburg, co-chair of the Out of the Cold program at Holy Blossom.

But the trepidation in the neighbourhood faded after the first year, Denaburg said. "Many in the community realized it wasn't a problem," she said. "Today, about one-third of the volunteers are from the community around us."

Toronto lawyer Peter Silverberg, who has acted for the objecting Beach residents, denies they were motivated by NIMBYism in threatening the church with legal action.

He said they were concerned about having been given scant opportunity for consultation and whether the program provided the best use of limited shelter resources.

"The program itself is very praiseworthy, although it might be questioned on the level of whether or not this is the best way to use ... very limited resources to look after this type of thing."

Silverberg, who would not say how many residents objected, said there might be better sites in the Beach for the shelter but he believes they were never examined.

The Jan. 16 meeting was organized by area councillor Sandra Bussin, who has tried to mediate the dispute since October, when the plan was announced.

The threat of an injunction has been postponed since she arranged for neutral facilitators to conduct the meeting. Silverberg, she said, replied that he would not proceed as long as the shelter didn't go ahead before the meeting could be held.

Bussin agreed the battle over the shelter might reflect badly on a neighbourhood known for progressive attitudes.

But she said about 100 area residents have volunteered to help with the program, and that those who have voiced concern may have legitimate complaints about a lack of information and opportunities to offer input.

"I think there needs to be an opportunity for greater dialogue between the partners. Because it's new, like anything, it needs to be talked through."

Although the church has held two public meetings on the shelter, Bussin said she believes a thorough airing would probably relieve most objections.

Kirkegaard agreed.

"This is a good neighbourhood with warm-hearted people," he said. "New ideas take a little bit of time and a little bit of extra communications so that everyone feels comfortable. It's not our preference to work in an adversarial fashion, but you know, patience is a virtue."

He said he'd welcome the meeting to assure "a small number" of concerned people that their views were being heard.

With files from Debra Black