

## **The bottom line on emergency shelter**

by Victoria Reinhardt

\*Mary came to Ramsey County from Wisconsin 5 months ago. She and her two daughters, ages 10 and 3, were fleeing an abusive relationship. Like many who migrate to Minnesota, she was looking for a better life for her and her children. The family stayed with Mary's brothers until the landlord required that they leave. Mary's family came to Ramsey County looking for something better and she found herself homeless. She did not come here in search of emergency shelter, but she did need one.

Cases like Mary's are not rare, as increasing numbers of women with children flee abusive situations. Unfortunately, federal and state budget changes due to welfare reform coupled with an unprecedented shortage of affordable housing in the twin cities market is contributing to a rise in homelessness. According to a Wilder Foundation report, between the years 1985 and 1994 there was a 518% increase in children experiencing homelessness in Minnesota. Gino Nelson of Catholic Charities says the shortage of housing in the twin cities area is causing an increased demand for temporary shelter. The budget changes at the Federal and State levels effected the way emergency shelter is funded. This forced the Ramsey County Commissioners to step up to the challenge or ignore the problem and allow the homeless shelter for families to close. My intuition told me early on that closing the family shelter was not an option I could live with. The moral, safety and health reasons for keeping families from living in the streets seemed obvious to me. However, I did want to understand the types of costs the county would incur if we were to stop funding the shelter.

I discovered that in the long run it would cost taxpayers more money if emergency shelter for families services are not provided. Without emergency shelters, the use of other, far costlier services, such as foster care and emergency room visits, greatly increase. Take the example at the beginning of this article. Mary was able to get into Ramsey County's family shelter. She stayed for 11 days (the longest possible stay is 30 days and the average is 12.5 days), she was assisted in finding a job and a place to live. While staying at the shelter, Mary and her children were able to stay together as a family. They had a safe place to live and a balanced diet, two important factors to well being that absent for homeless families. The children were screened and tested and the 10 year old was enrolled in school. During a routine medical screening the 3 year old was found to have respiratory problems. A participating organization was able to get her medication at a reduced rate. Now, instead of a homeless woman with a chronically ill child, Mary is working (and paying taxes) in Ramsey County, has an apartment and goes to business school at night. Her 10 year old is in school and her 3 year old is in day care. Mary is less likely to need public assistance again and her children will have a chance to succeed as well.

If there was no emergency shelter or strict "residency requirements" (how you determine the residency of someone who by definition has no residence seems silly to me) Mary's story would be quite different. She would have been on the streets with two children, one of whom needed medical attention. This medical attention would not have been preventative, but rather an expensive emergency room visit. One visit to the emergency room could cost as much as her 11 day stay at the shelter. The children would be less likely to go to school. Homeless parents also risk the foster placement of their children. Foster care is not only extremely costly to the County, it also breaks up the family. Without the shelter, Mary would not be working, paying taxes or going to school She is a productive member of society and a good role model for her children.

The Ramsey County homelessness prevention programs work. We ultimately save taxpayer dollars by providing cost effective homelessness prevention programs. We often times save and transform lives, as is the case with Mary and her children. That to me is a wise and moral investment.

\*True story, fictitious name