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Confusion for Philadelphia Homeless

By WILLIAM K. STEVENS, SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES

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"They explained that they were closing down the shelter," said Ms. Bell, recalling how the management told her last Saturday that she had to leave.

A sympathetic token-seller at a train station let Ms. Bell and others who lacked carfare onto a train that took them to a city office to seek help. There, in a chaotic scene, she joined about 500 other homeless people who the city government says were evicted from 22 privately owned but publicly financed shelters as part of a contract dispute with the city. Living in Uncertainty

The city has ended its dealings with the 16 operators of the 22 shelters and says it will never deal with them again. The 500 displaced residents are being temporarily housed by the city.

But they continue to face an uncertain future. And the days of confusion and recrimination that followed the evictions cast a new light on what officials here like to think of as a model for dealing with the plight of the homeless.

Philadelphia's strategy, developed over the last three years, has two main aspects. The first is to move homeless families out of temporary shelters and into permanent homes that are being rehabilitated through a joint effort of the city and Federal governments and the homeless themselves.

In the meantime, the city has got out of the shelter business by contracting with private and nonprofit operators of 100 shelters that until Saturday housed about 5,000 of the estimated 15,000 homeless people here. The city pays the operators of the shelters and sets standards for them. That is where the trouble arose. City Demands Cited

The city wanted the shelters to provide "a lot more services," said Beth Leiberman, a shelter operator. "But with the money that existed, we couldn't have afforded it." Other operators say that the city was six months behind in paying them.

Contracts calling for the city to pay the operators \$13 a day per person and up to \$284 per person a month expired last June 30. New agreements with the owners of all but 45 of the 100 shelters were reached before then, and a three-month extension of the contract was agreed to with the others. Talks are continuing with most of those, and they are still being paid even though the extension expired at 12:01 A.M. Saturday.

But 16 operators of shelters with a total of 1,000 beds chose a different course. Some told residents to take their belongings and leave, many of the homeless people said. But some of the operators said that in the light of the contract uncertainties, they had simply advised the residents to check with the city about available options.

At 10 A.M. Saturday, said Michael McLaughlin, who operates a different shelter than the one Ms. Bell lived in, "We told our residents to find out what the city had for them, that their rooms would be kept intact and that hopefully, they'd be back by nightfall." Evictions Called Widespread

Ms. Lieberman, one of the 16 with whom the city has severed relations, said, "We never evicted anybody." Both Mr. McLaughlin and Ms. Lieberman said that many residents remained in their shelters.

But Jane Malone, the director of the city's office of the homeless, said that stories like Ms. Bell's were common, that there was plenty of evidence of widespread evictions and that all 16 operators had carried them out.

Chris Sprowal, who founded the National Union of the Homeless and is widely regarded as Philadelphia's most visible and effective advocate for the homeless, charged that the 16 were simply interested in profits. As to the six-month delays in city payments, he said: "When you deal with the city, you deal with certain givens. And one of the givens is that they're slow."

The fact that the 16 operators "will use women and children, put them in the streets," Mr. Sprowal said, "destroys any credibility they have."

The sudden appearance on Saturday of hundreds of people at the city's reception center for the homeless touched off a furious scramble to find space for them, since the city no longer was running any shelters. A local group founded by Mr. Sprowal, the Committee for Dignity and Fairness for the Homeless, pitched in to help with the search, on the condition the city sever its ties with the 15 operators. 'Everybody Chipped In'

The city agreed. "Anyone who has evicted someone has indicated tht they wish to terminate their business relationship with the City of Philadelphia," Ms. Malone said. "We have nothing left to discuss with them."

All of those evicted were placed in temporary shelter by nightfall Saturday. Ms. Bell and her children ended up, with some 250 other people, at the Stenton Child Center in Northwest Philadelphia, which had been a shelter for the homeless until budget cuts forced the city to close it.

"This place was filthy when we got it," Ms. Bell said. "But everybody chipped in and next day, you know, cleaned the place up real good." As she spoke, men were unloading canvas cots from a U-haul truck outside. What comes next? Mayor W. Wilson Goode said Tuesday that the city planned to continue with its current program and develop a plan that will lead to sound contracts with private shelter operators. 'Better Than Moving'

"I hope they reconsider their position," Ms. Lieberman said of city officials, "because I have a lot of residents in my home who don't want to leave. I don't know what tomorrow's going to bring. But if the city decides to close us down, at least we're giving them time to find good housing for them."

Ms. Bell and others must make do. "I don't really want to be here," she said of the Stenton center. "But it's better than moving from place to place to place to place."

What she really needs, she said, is a permanent home she cannot afford on the monthly welfare check that sustains her family.

If this week's events make the city accelerate that program, Mr. Sprowal said, it may turn out that the 16 operators "couldn't have done a better thing for the homeless in Philadelphia than this."