

NY charity finds shelter for homeless in Hamptons

FRANK ELTMAN - Associated Press - Associated Press

It's not so easy to spot the homeless in the Hamptons in the summer, when celebrity A-listers fly in by helicopter and Wall Street whizzes drive out in their Jaguars and Lexuses.

It's not that the homeless don't exist in the string of famously exclusive waterfront communities on the eastern end of Long Island — they just blend in more easily when it's warm.

Some landscape laborers curl up in barns with the mowers and leaf blowers. Others, who struggle with mental problems or drug and alcohol issues, live in tents deep in the Long Island woods. Then there are those with minimum-wage jobs who simply can't afford prohibitive Hamptons rents and live in their cars.

But when the November winds blow and the mercury plummets faster than falling leaves, several dozen are given refuge by an organization called Maureen's Haven.

"Essentially, in its purest form, we exist to prevent homeless adults from freezing to death during the coldest winter months," said Tracey Lutz, executive director of the privately funded charity founded about a dozen years ago to provide a place to stay and a warm meal for those unwilling or unable to avail themselves of government-run shelters.

The charity works with a network of churches in eastern Long Island to open their basements and auditoriums on a rotating basis throughout the week, staffing the facilities with volunteers. Some churches accommodate several dozen, while others take in just a handful of people nightly. It isn't fancy, but it's a warm meal and a place to sleep.

As many as 50 people each night begin gathering at a modest house in a neighborhood in Riverhead, the nearby seat of Suffolk County, where Maureen's Haven runs the only private homeless shelter on the East End. Lutz says the homeless, including a small percentage of illegal aliens who are barred from seeking county assistance, undergo screening before being permitted to board vans that take them to a designated church for the evening.

Bags are searched daily for drugs or alcohol. Participants also must adhere to a code of conduct, which includes no fighting and no weapons of any sort.

Anyone who fails to pass muster at Maureen's Haven, which also bans registered sex offenders, are referred to the Suffolk County Department of Social Services, which provides emergency shelter for as many as 500 families and several hundred

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individuals nightly at dozens of locations.

Many of those who turn to Maureen's Haven say they are native "East Enders" reluctant to travel as far as 50 miles across the vast island from their home turf for a warm bed, Lutz said. They "prefer to remain in their community rather than be placed wherever the county has a bed," she said.

Jennifer Sulzer, a 37-year-old mother of four teenage sons who currently live with relatives, said medical problems have prevented her from working. She said she has been using Maureen's Haven on and off for the past four years.

"You're around people who are loving and have compassion," said Sulzer, who once had an apartment in Riverhead.

Michael Kline, 43, says he spent more than three years living in the woods after his career as a carpenter building store interiors fell apart because of drug problems. He is currently unemployed.

"I went from Park Avenue to park bench," said Kline, who said he attends an outpatient drug treatment program for three hours a day. "This place has given me the ability to go to treatment every day. If I was out there tonight in the rain, the last thing I would want to do is get up tomorrow morning and go sit in group for three hours."

Lutz said the Great Recession changed the face of homelessness across the country, including the Hamptons.

"We might want to believe that people are homeless because they're drug addicts and they're mentally ill and they're criminals and all these other things and therefore it's their own fault," she said. "We can't necessarily hold onto that for much longer. Because it's a fantasy."

She said she sees clients who work in local drugstores and restaurants but just can't make ends meet, especially in a region where an omelet in some restaurants can cost as much as \$30.

Forbes magazine this year named the village of Sagaponack in Southampton as the fourth-richest ZIP code in America, with a median home price of \$4.1 million and a median income of \$103,000, according to census figures.

Many of those who have vacation homes in the Hamptons, however, do not necessarily identify themselves as local residents for the purposes of the census and other data.

Suffolk County officials said this month that 20 Southampton families were being provided emergency shelter in one of its group homes, but noted the figures are constantly in flux. Suffolk listed 55 families in the town of Riverhead being housed in shelters.

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"They're working at Rite Aid and they're working at Friendly's; they're not making enough money to put a roof over their head,' Lutz said. 'They're making enough money to sort of buy some of the things that they need, so they come here so that they have a safe place to sleep.'

Maureen's Haven operates on an annual budget of \$340,000, much of which comes from private donations. Its offices feature several tables with computers where homeless clients can look for employment and available housing during the day.

Joann Piche, chairwoman of the Maureen's Haven board of directors, said she understands it may be difficult for some to think of the Hamptons as a place where the homeless need help.

"The privet hedges, the beaches, the resort community, the gigantic homes that are used 12 weekends out of the year," she said. "Every time I drive past one of these homes that for the most part are empty, I'm thinking, wow, how many people could we house in this place?"

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