

Detroit homeless organize with help from CCHD, Capuchins

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Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Can the homeless be organized? In Detroit, the answer is yes.

And the homeless are doing it largely by themselves, with a little help from some college students, a Capuchin monastery and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, which provides funding.

They've taken on the name Detroit Action Commonwealth — a swipe, with its initials, at a city institution, the private Detroit Athletic Club, which for a long time did not admit blacks and to this day does not admit women into its ranks.

"They say you can't organize the homeless. Well, we up and did it," said Clark Washington, a Detroit Action Commonwealth board member and treasurer of one of its chapters.

Washington got involved when a friend came over to his daughter's house, where he was living. The friend wanted Washington to join him at a meeting at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen. Washington said he wasn't that inclined to go,

but went because "I get to eat."

The meeting was a "ban the box" meeting — the box being the blank square applicants for Detroit city government jobs must check if they have been convicted of a felony. In a city where unemployment is already high, ex-felons have found it nearly impossible to get jobs if they tell the truth on their job applications, and get fired if employers find out they've lied.

Ultimately, the Detroit Action Commonwealth prevailed. It was one of several victories, some big, some small, some quick and some that took a lot of time.

Two years ago in January, when overnight temperatures were regularly falling below zero in Detroit, the organization learned that the city had been given \$150,000 to open warming centers for the homeless, yet had opened none. "We needed them in November," Washington said at a Feb. 13 presentation as part of the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington.

Busloads of commonwealth members descended on city government headquarters and were

told by an official he needed a week to look into the situation. A week passed, the busloads returned, and when the official hemmed and hawed about whether any centers would be opened, the homeless chanted their opposition and threatened to barricade themselves inside the building. Those actions finally brought about the opening of some warming centers.

In another episode, Detroit Action Commonwealth leaders worked with both district court and traffic court officials over 14 months to conduct regularly scheduled "street court" proceedings to help homeless and broke Detroiters work out payment or forgiveness plans for traffic and parking tickets and to work toward relieving criminal and civil judgments lodged against them.

St. Bonaventure, the Capuchin monastery in the city, has been feeding poor Detroiters since the Great Depression started in 1929, according to Capuchin Fr. Bob Malloy. One of those who helped establish the outreach was Fr. Solanus Casey, a Capuchin priest now

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Capuchin Fr. Ray Stadmeier, left, and Purcell Pryor knead loaves of white bread at the ROPE house bakery in 2007 in Detroit. ROPE, which stands for Reaching Our Potential Everyday, is a Capuchin program for the homeless and unemployed.

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being considered for sainthood. It started with sandwiches handed out outside the monastery and later expanded into a full-blown soup kitchen which has now branched out into two additional locations.

"We're very well respected by the city," Fr. Malloy said.

The Detroit Action Commonwealth is organized like a labor union, with chapters at each of the three soup kitchen sites operating like to union locals — an easy concept to grasp to many of its members, who once worked at now-shuttered auto or supplier plants.

Molly Sweeney, who works with the Detroit Action Commonwealth, said one of her University of Michigan professors, Greg Markus, was told that the homeless could not be organized. "He said, 'B.S. Let's try this'" — and sent some of his students to Detroit to work on a project.

The organization also has conducted voter registration drives among the homeless soup kitchen patrons, going so far as to hunt down their birth certificates in Detroit and other Michigan cities. The voter ID card serves as the "government-issued ID" needed to prove identity at a host of places. The Capuchins let the homeless list the monastery address as their residence.

The commonwealth also played

"gotcha" with a privately run men's shelter whose mattresses were infested with bedbugs. When shelter operators, at a meeting with the commonwealth, waffled on improving conditions, the commonwealth pointed the shelter representatives to the presence of officials from the shelter's biggest funder. That brought about instant changes.

Washington, though, still considers himself homeless. While he lives in his daughter's house, she

has moved to a new city for job opportunities, and the house faces foreclosure. Washington had been injured at the auto factory where he worked and underwent more than three years of physical therapy; his job had vanished by the time he was able to work again. Soon after getting a new job elsewhere, that factory shut down, a victim of the auto industry's downturn.

As for getting a new job, "I'd like to," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

