



In January and February as temperatures dip into the thirties the Good Samaritan Mission, pictured here, will be filled to capacity with the homeless and those living in substandard housing who seek shelter from the cold. Good Samaritan was just recently named a primary freeze shelter by Hillsborough County.

## Mission Shelters, Feeds Freeze Victims

By Sherri Milson

As the temperature dips into the 30s, a family living in what most would call a shack with no heat and broken windows bundles up, preparing for the long cold night ahead.

On this same night, a man wearing several jackets and a winter cap reclines in his car. This is his home, where he will sleep tonight.

Families and individuals like those depicted above easily fall prey to the freezing nights that sneak up so suddenly on South County and though the forecast may be a balmy 80 degrees today, that can change drastically in a matter of days, leaving the homeless and those in substandard housing to do their best to stay warm.

But there is hope for individuals like those depicted above. With the coldest months of the season ahead, Good Samaritan Mission in Balm is gearing up to help shelter and feed those who cannot help themselves on freezing winter nights.

The Hillsborough County freeze shelter program, which provides overnight accommodations for needy persons when temperatures approach freezing, is a joint venture between the county, the City of Tampa and social services agencies in the area, according to Vince Pardo of Hillsborough County Community Services Department.

"The opening of a freeze shelter is based on weather forecasts from the Ruskin Weather Service. The predicted low temperature for the coming night is adjusted by the wind chill factor, and the decision to open the shelter is a joint one," states Pardo.

One social service agency thriving in South County that participates in the shelter program is Good Samaritan Mission. Not only does the mission provide help to the needy through freeze shelter provisions and hot meals at the two Wimauma shelters, but is quick to help those in the area in need of all types assistance throughout the year.

The mission, under the direction of the Rev. William Cruz, concentrates its efforts on these local shelters: Bethune Park at Rail Road Street and Edina in Wimauma; and at its home facility at 14920 Balm-Wimauma Rd.

"Until December of this year we were operating primarily at Bethune," says Cruz. "At that time however, this facility (the mission building) was put on the list of primary shelters."

Due to its location, the mission will probably serve a mostly hispanic, migrant crowd. In Wimauma, which is described by some people as a highly segregated community, many migrants have expressed apprehension about the escalation of racial tensions at Bethune Park, located in a community primarily inhabited by blacks.

When questioned about the new freeze shelter equipped to accommodate 20-25 persons, Pardo comments, "With the addition of Good Samaritan, there are five primary shelters in the county. Some determining factors for shelter location in rural areas include targeting pockets of homeless or places where substandard housing runs high."

Thus, this year brings more people to put up for the night, and more mouths to feed. But the extra work load doesn't frighten the mission or its staff, which has been involved in the freeze shelter program for the past three years.

Thanks to other social agencies like Metropolitan Ministries and the Red Cross, the mission will receive help in its attempt to provide cots, blankets and food, most of which are dry products, to shelter inhabitants.

Despite the help from these others agencies, the responsibility of smooth, efficient shelter operation falls mainly on Good Samaritan itself. It serves as a vital South County link in the program, taking on much more responsibility than most realize.

"Though we do get help from the county and other agencies, we have also been providing needed articles and food," claims Cruz. However, he believes that dispersed shelter locations sometimes delay shipment of much needed items.

"In some instances, by the time we receive the food, it is evening and we still have to cook and transport it. To remedy this situation, we have taken it upon ourselves to provide food for the meals." Most provisions used by the mission

come from donations by local church groups and individuals.

Cruz describes Good Samaritan as a crisis intervention ministry, saying "We deal mainly with crises, but as residents of the community we are also concerned with long term improvement."

In addition to participation in the shelter program, the mission has served more than 40,000 individuals and families in the past four years, helping mostly migrant families in the area.

According to Cruz, the migrant population is somewhat disadvantaged and in need of special assistance. He cites substandard housing rented for exorbitant prices and lack of credit as several factors contributing to the migrant plight.

"I've discovered it's not easy to get those in need to leave their properties," says Cruz. "Living in homes with faulty or no locks on the doors and some broken windows, their empty homes are targeted by looters," he explains. Possible looting is a risk that those leaving to seek shelter must face, even though police patrol more heavily when shelters are open.

In some instances, those in need of shelter who would be willing to take such a risk, aren't even aware that there is a place to go, according to Cruz. "If there was just some way we could get the word out. Perhaps a police car with a PA (public address) system...We could help more people with the shelters," says Cruz.

Though a possible communication barrier may keep some residents from finding out about the freeze shelters, for those who do know about and seek shelter at either of the two primary South County centers, they will be open from 6 p.m. until 8 a.m. unless otherwise indicated. If a cold front is stationary, the shelters will remain open around the clock according to Cruz.

If it should happen that the two primary shelters are filled to capacity, secondary shelters will be opened to accommodate the overflow, says Pardo.