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Hospitality program gets new home; fundraiser fair planned Saturday

By *JARED KALTWASSER*
STAFF WRITER

After months of uncertainty, FISH Hospitality Program Inc. has found a new permanent day facility, officials said.

"It's a huge relief," said Susan Baybutt, executive director of the organization, which provides temporary housing to up to 14 homeless persons. "We were really struggling for a while not knowing whether the program would continue because obviously if we don't have a day facility, there's a huge piece of the program missing. So it was a big worry."

FISH operates a rotating shelter, a program that enables the program's clients — mostly women and children — to stay overnight at local churches. The agency has about a dozen network churches in Middlesex, Somerset and Union counties, which take turns housing FISH's clients for one week at a time.

But most of those churches cannot accommodate the shelter residents during the day, so FISH transports its clients to a central day site, which serves as their "home base" while the clients search for jobs and permanent housing.

For the past seven years, that day site was a building owned by a Piscataway church, but late last year, FISH was asked to leave the site because the church wanted to demolish the aged structure.

Since then, FISH has used two temporary day sites, but neither location was available permanently. Brock Haussamen, a member of FISH's board of directors, said it's been an anxious few months.

"It was helpful to have the two temporary facilities that we had, and I think I and maybe others had a feeling that if we kept the publicity going and kept the word out there, we would at least be able to get temporary quarters if we needed them," Haussamen said. "But it doesn't really do much for everyone's anxiety as to what's going to happen. It just makes it easy to forget about it for a while."

But help finally came six weeks ago, Baybutt said. A nearby church in Middlesex County called and offered to help. FISH is keeping the name of the church private in order to protect the shelter's residents.

"It's an ideal location," Baybutt said. "It's not too far from our office, it's a large area that we're going to be able to have and to use. It's got a nice big kitchen and restrooms."

Baybutt said she hopes to transfer to the new day site by the end of the month. FISH and the church have a three-month trial agreement, but Baybutt said the church appears to "really want to make it work" for the long-term.

In the meantime, the charity is preparing for one of its major fund raisers, a flea market and yard sale scheduled Saturday in the school yard of St. John's Roman Catholic Church, 315 N. Washington Ave.

"We have had the flea market for many years now — about 10 years — in this same location," Baybutt said.

She said everything from clothes to crafts to food items, including baked goods and hot dogs, will be available, plus all the typical flea market finds.

"Some of the things there are really good," she said. "It's yard-sale type stuff, so if you're looking for something, you might find it there."

Baybutt said the group usually sees a constant stream of visitors during the one-day sale. Anyone seeking more information about the event can call FISH at (732) 968-5957.

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What you can do: The mission of FISH is to serve homeless women and families in Middlesex, Somerset and Union counties by providing shelter and meals, and other assistance as needed, to help them live independently. FISH helps those in need by obtaining housing, jobs and medical services. For more information on how to help FISH, call (732) 968-5957 or e-mail fishhosp@aol.com

If you go: FISH Hospitality Program, Inc. will hold a flea market and yard sale fund raiser from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Saturday at St. John's Roman Catholic Church, 315 Washington St., Dunellen. For more information, call (732) 968-5957.
