

Family Promise would help the homeless in Ontario County

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A national nonprofit would be the umbrella organization for a network in Ontario County to help the homeless

CANANDAIGUA — A number of churches are coming on board to mark the first step in Ontario County housing a network to help the homeless.

Thirteen churches in all are needed to offer their sites where homeless individuals and families can spend the night. Participating churches and other area organizations and agencies would work together in a network operating under a national nonprofit called [Family Promise](#).

A [Family Promise](#) program provides shelter, meals and support for homeless families, relying on existing community resources such as places of worship for overnight lodging, congregations for volunteers, social service agencies for screening and referrals and places to go during the day.

Kathleen Wagner, who is spearheading the Family Promise of Ontario County development committee, said a meeting last month to get the project off the ground went well. A number of churches are interested in participating and First Presbyterian Church in Victor is currently on board, she said.

Anyone interested in the program is urged to attend the next meeting, on June 28, also at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Canandaigua. Family Promise Regional Director Angelica Johnson is expected to return for the June meeting to check progress, offer advice and answer questions.

Once up and running, Family Promise of Ontario County would help the more than 60 families in the community who experience homelessness every year. The program would capitalize on the progress that has already been made through [Nowhere To Go and help families](#) that are known to be in need. The Nowhere To Go community forum works with a number of organizations through [Partnership for Ontario County](#) that have made [ending homelessness](#) a priority.

In one development, those in need of shelter who were not able for any reason to obtain help through county Social Services are getting help from a special team that connects them with the services they need.

“It’s a more direct, hands-on approach,” said Bonnie Ross, Partnership executive director.

Through Family Promise, congregations that have space in their buildings provide temporary homes. Church buildings or other places can provide day centers where families can take showers, receive case management and look for housing and jobs. The program relies on volunteers to give time, make meals, and share hospitality.

Family Promise addresses homelessness without creation of a homeless shelter that can be costly and not feasible for some communities. Ontario County does not have a homeless shelter.

According to Family Promise, on average, 76 percent of the families it serves gain long-term housing while in the program, within nine weeks.

“Not only does this high success rate mean many more families stably housed, it is also a tremendous cost saving to the community as diversion from far more expensive interventions. ...

Our approach of keeping families together, identifying their strengths, partnering with the community for solutions means that families are at much lower risk of returning to homelessness,” states the nonprofit, which services 50,000 parents and children annually. The organization relies on 170,000 volunteers, and as a result of Family Promise affiliates, more than 900 community initiatives — such as housing programs, homelessness prevention and childcare — have been created nationally.

The nearest Family Promise affiliate to Ontario County is in Rochester and is called the Rochester Area Interfaith Hospitality Network (RAIHN). In 2014, it served 27 families (including 50 children). The average length of stay in the program was 45 days, and 90 percent of families remained in permanent housing after one year.