

‘Promise’ aims to help people get on their feet

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At any one time, there could be more than 200 children going to school in Ontario County who don’t have a place to call home.

That doesn’t mean they are sleeping on the street, in cars or under bridges. What it does mean is their families have seen better times and want to again.

With that in mind, a new organization called Family Promise of Ontario County has enlisted close to 15 church congregations in the county to help families change their stories and begin a new chapter in their lives.

“Ontario County is clearly telling us there is an issue here. There were 209 homeless students in 2015 in Ontario County school districts, but statistics tell us that 50 percent of homeless children are under the age of 5, so that number is significantly higher,” said Kathleen Wagner, the organization’s founder. “Clearly there is a need, but homelessness is not always visible. These families could be staying with friends or family, so they have a roof over their heads.”

Through an affiliation with Family Promise, a national organization based in New Jersey that goes back almost 30 years and is found in about 200 communities across the country, the Ontario County group started meeting last May. Its first order of business was reaching out to congregations across the county to gauge the level of interest.

“We are following a national model that has a proven track record of success in helping homeless families and children,” said Wagner, a Victor resident. “However, unless we had the interest of many congregations, we knew it was not going to fly here. We put together a team after that first meeting and we’ve been at it since last summer.”

Their biggest goal is to open a “day center” where parents can drop their children off for school. Adults would then go to work, if they have a job, or talk to a caseworker at the center who would help them look for work.

Ideally, the center would be in Canandaigua or Geneva. It could be a donated building or extra space in a church, and would include computers, telephones and caseworkers.

The other part of the equation is for homeless families to stay at “host congregations” for several weeks, where they would get a warm meal, a safe place to rest and fellowship. Financial literacy and support to secure permanent housing would also be addressed at the day center and churches.

“We are still in the development process. We have no date for opening, but we’ve had a lot of success and have been incredibly well received,” Wagner said. “Our goal is to open our doors sometime this year.”

To date, about 15 congregations around the county have signed on. They include churches in Geneva, Gorham, Canandaigua, Bloomfield, Victor, Farmington, Clifton Springs and Phelps. Congregations in Naples and Honeoye are being sought.

Jill McLellan of Seneca Castle and her husband, John Tornow, are heading up the transportation committee for Family Promise of Ontario County. They recently procured the donation of a 14-passenger van from Matthews Bus Company in Rochester, since 14 is the maximum number of homeless people at one time in a congregation.

“Now we are looking for someone to do maintenance on the van and maybe paint a logo on it,” said McLellan, a Quaker who is working closely with Farmington Friends Church. “It’s a pretty exciting program because it gets people back on their feet. There isn’t anyplace around here that does that.”

Wagner, a parishioner at the First Presbyterian Church in Victor, said she got the idea to start Family Promise of Ontario County after doing some ecumenical work with inner city children in Rochester.

“You can’t be involved in that without homelessness kicking you in the face, so a group of us decided to explore options to address it in Ontario County, because it is an issue here,” she said.

The organization is incorporated as a non-profit by the state, and tax-deductible donations can be made on the website (FamilyPromiseOntarioCounty.org) or by mailing a check made out to the First Presbyterian Church of Victor. It can be mailed to Family Promise of Ontario County, 70 E. Main St., Victor, NY 14564.

People or congregations interested in joining the organization can contact Wagner at dwagne2@rochester.rr.com or (585) 704-9776.

“We have found widespread support and are in a really good place now. We want to stress it is a handup program, not a handout program,” she said. “The goal is to have families sustainable and on their own in 60 days. I have no doubt we are going to be successful.”