

# Rutland Herald (VT)

July 11, 2006

## Mission Makes a Stand for Clients' Privacy

By Brent Curtis, Herald Staff



*Sharon Russell, Daryl Patterson, Donna Baccei and Clinton Granger stand in front of the Open Door Mission in Rutland on Monday afternoon. Photo: CASSANDRA HOTALING / RUTLAND HERALD*

The Open Door Mission is revolting against a requirement to electronically transmit personal information about those staying at the shelter to a new state-run database.

The 40 homeless individuals and veterans staying at the facility on Park Street in Rutland and the administrators running it have written letters to the state Agency of Human Services and Gov. James Douglas protesting the ongoing implementation of a new automated information system that tracks the activities of Vermont's homeless population and their use of state services.

Starting this spring, the state Office of Economic Opportunity, which oversees Vermont's shelters, began moving its data from printed copies to a comprehensive database.

The new system was developed in part to comply with federal requirements that all shelters receiving U.S. Housing and Urban Development emergency shelter grants report data electronically into a Homeless Management Information System.

But state officials said they're also hopeful that the new system will help improve delivery of services to those staying at shelters.

"It's about finding out who we're serving and how to do it more effectively," said Cathy Voyer, director of housing and transportation at Human Services.

But administrators at the mission say they are prepared to forego the roughly \$40,000 they receive in federal grants rather than transmit their clients' personal information.

"The last person to tag someone was Adolf Hitler," said Sharon Russell, the mission's executive director. "I'm not going to do that. The one thing I have with these people is that they trust me."

Donna Baccei, the mission's associate director, said she would resign before she transmits personal information to the database.

Russell said the 28 homeless veterans and 12 other individuals staying at the shelter have already told her they don't want their names, Social Security numbers or any other identifying information put into the database.

Which isn't a problem, state officials said – sort of.

Personal information is only transmitted into the system with the written permission of an individual, Voyer said. State officials analyzing information in the database wouldn't have access to names, Social Security numbers or other identifiers, she added, and none of the database entries would appear on the Internet.

But if no one or very few individuals choose to participate then a shelter's federal grant funding could be threatened, she added.

Without a healthy number of voluntary contributions, Voyer said state agencies wouldn't be able to compile an accurate overview of the homeless situation.

“If a (shelter) provided services to a family four times in one year and each time they said ‘no’ then each time they would be considered a different family,” she said explaining the inaccuracies that occur when personal information is lacking in the system.

“It's my belief that eventually, as people see that the agencies are doing this and are able to document activities more effectively and provide better services, then people will be more comfortable participating,” Voyer added.

But veterans staying at the mission said Monday that they were adamantly against releasing their information.

Daryl Patterson said he has been staying at the shelter while he recovers from a broken back. While he is thankful to the mission and its staff for helping him get back on his feet, he said he doesn't want to be branded by future employers as a former homeless man.

“There's a stigma that goes along with staying here,” he said. “Once you're labeled as homeless, there's a smell about you. I find the idea of being tracked offensive. My theory is, ‘Give me your address and personal address so I can track you and see how much you like it.’”

As a retired Army colonel who served under two presidents at the White House, Clinton Granger said he knows how bureaucracies work and when they don't work.

In a letter addressed to the governor, Granger, who is staying at the mission while receiving services at the Veterans Center Hospital in White River Junction, wrote “I

believe the use of the Internet would compromise my personal privacy in a period when such privacy is critically important to me. Please use your powers to protect the privacy of those in shelters. The Internet is not secure.”

While Granger, Russell and others at the mission said they’ve received assurances that the database would be a secure, all involved said they had misgivings about the security of e-mail systems used to transmit information and about human errors while handling the information.

Rep. Steven Howard, D-Rutland, wrote in a letter to the Governor’s Office that recent slips in the Department of Veterans Affairs in Washington, D.C., where personal information about thousands of veterans went missing, illustrated his concerns.

“The residents of the mission deserve privacy,” Howard wrote. “They deserve respect and they should absolutely not be required to put their future in jeopardy by providing your office with personal information.”

Jason Gibbs, a spokesman for Douglas’ office, said Monday the governor had only recently heard concerns about the database but was moving swiftly to investigate the complaints.

“The governor’s very pleased that people have raised these concerns,” he said. “The governor certainly wants to make sure that any new system is safe and secure before it’s implemented.”

Gibbs emphasized that the administration has no intentions of forcing homeless individuals to provide personal information. However, he said the state has no control over federal policies that could cut funding to shelters that don’t provide adequate personal information.

“The federal requirements are out of our hands,” he said. “All we can do is work with (the mission) to implement a system that meets the requirements or develop a separate system for their work with the state.”

“The bottom line is that their information is private and they have a right not to provide it,” Gibbs added.

Voyer said she plans to visit the mission soon to meet with Russell.

“I have the utmost respect for the Open Door Mission and I want to work with them to implement the system in a coordinated way,” she said.

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