

## Social Services at Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen

An in-depth look at the support program offered with every meal at New York's largest soup kitchen

By Hannah Albee, M.Ed.

Embedded in its core mission to provide emergency meals to hungry and homeless New Yorkers, Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen has, since its opening in 1982, provided emotional and practical resources that help dining guests survive -- and even lead fulfilling, manageable lives.

On average 4,000 guests connect with the Social Services Program every month. Their needs are broad and complex and the social services counselors regularly encounter individuals with health and housing emergencies along with urgent needs for daily essential items like hygiene kits, socks, and weather appropriate clothing. A meeting with a counselor can make the difference between a job interview or prolonged unemployment. Interview appropriate attire in the clothing pantry, phone access and even Metrocards are just a few of the practical items offered that help them to navigate their way toward financial stability.

Rich Trifiro, who manages the program, never sees a dull moment. Overseeing 16 volunteer counselors, one paid staff person, and partnering human services organizations who provide outreach and informational tables, Mr. Trifiro also takes the time to meet with guests whose situations require extra time and attention.

"I'd say that the greatest challenges are housing and employment issues," says Mr. Trifiro. "It often feels like a difficult cycle, because people who are not properly housed, feeling safe and well rested are not able to work and be reliable at a job or present with an employable image."

For homeless guests, he explains, employment opportunities can be further cut short because strict shelter curfews limit their ability to accept night time shifts when there is more of a demand for manual labor and restaurant jobs. "I believe that if housing and employment became priorities to make available to the population we serve, homelessness and those at risk of homelessness would drop significantly in number," he states.

In a 2017 soup kitchen guest survey, 79% of responding guests reported unemployment and 54% reported street or shelter homelessness. The National Coalition of the Homeless cites a myriad of obstacles that make it difficult for these individuals to overcome their situation, including chronic health problems or disability, having young children with no access to child care, limited or no past work experience or marketable job skills, mental health or substance abuse problems and lack of access to transportation that make it difficult for individuals to overcome their situation.

Mr. Trifiro says guests are most often overwhelmed by more than one issue. "Often they need some psychiatric help, medication, or help with an addiction, in addition to a housing, employment, medical or legal issue," he says. "We try to break it down for them to address the most immediate problem, or the one standing in the way of them mobilizing their own efforts to follow through and do the legwork to eventually get to a better place."

While many of the soup kitchen's guests struggle with intergenerational poverty, the social services counselors meet their fair share of guests who are seeking help for the first time, sometimes late in life when limited social security benefits don't make ends meet. Mr. Trifiro recalls one such guest, who he met the day before a snowstorm. "She had never been homeless and was terrified," he explains. An educated woman in her sixties, she had become isolated from family and friends. Then, after spending down all her cash and assets without any financial planning or advice, she found herself in a housing emergency. "I spoke with the director of the drop-in center, which was booked to overflowing due to the weather, but they made room for her. Together with them, we laid out a plan for the woman to apply for senior housing. There was a lot of legwork for her to do on her own, and she often came in to get emotional support and advice during the process. It was a challenging time for her. But within 4 months she was moved to a transitional center for seniors, and 6 months later she was offered a studio apartment on the UWS, where she resides today."

Mr. Trifiro emphasizes the broad scope of situations soup kitchen guests struggle with. "There are ...people who have had a lot of bad luck, or lived paycheck to paycheck in an expensive city and lost a job, and things went downhill. Many of them will find a way out," he says. "But there are a large number of our guests who struggle with significant addiction issues and/or mental health issues. These are both very challenging conditions which for many people never resolve. They may not want to comply with medication that could help due to the side effects, or because when they are not on the medication their choices are not stable. And if they have lost their support system ... they find

themselves with little help .... These people still need care and help so the food and the supportive services allows them some sense of comfort.”

Despite the meticulous tracking of numbers of guests served, the unquantifiable outcomes that Mr. Trifiro and his team help to create often go unknown when individuals no longer need emergency food and social services. “Whenever I have guests return with an exuberant mood and thanks for a referral our program made which resulted in an improvement in their lives, I realize that what we are doing is working,” remarks Trifiro. “... I am always reminded that although resources are scarce... each time we help someone, it could make a qualitative difference in their experience and future.”

**Social Services offered at Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen consist of:**

- Onsite provisions, including:
  - clothing pantry
  - ID cards. A laminated HASK photo ID is not a government ID, but it does allow guests whose IDs are lost or stolen to access services at agencies that require IDs.
  - Metrocards for important travel
  - Toiletries
  - reading glasses
  - blankets, sleeping bags and donated items
  - phone access and mailing address
  - resume and job search consulting in conjunction with a fully equipped computer lab
- Referrals to all necessary services including:
  - legal help
  - medical and dental, addiction services, etc
  - immigration issues,
  - counseling needs,
  - needs for structured day services and case management.
  - free haircuts and other clothing pantries
- Onsite Outreach health, housing and benefits organizations that offer
  - Information
  - Health Workshops
  - Blood pressure and vision screening
  - Flu vaccines
  - Meditation and chiropractic care