

**An Introduction to
THE INTERFAITH HOSPITALITY
NETWORK**



*A Community Response for
Homeless Families*

HOMELESSNESS

Congregations across the country are wrestling with the question of how to be “our brother’s keeper” as homelessness grows to touch virtually every city and town in our nation. A sensitive and compassionate response is needed to address this difficult and painful problem.

Today, hundreds of thousands of Americans - children and adults - are homeless. Our nation’s diverse homeless population includes a growing number of traditional families, one-parent families, veterans, working people, victims of domestic or neighborhood violence, and many others.

In a country concerned for its children, we are shocked to learn that over half of the homeless are women and children and that families are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. Lower income families often live from one paycheck to the next. A major illness, an apartment-condo conversion, poor economic times, or other forces beyond their control can drive these working people into homelessness.

Our Response

People of faith and religious communities want to respond to the needs of their homeless “neighbors” but often lack a vehicle to focus their efforts. What can we do to help? Where do we begin? How do we become part of the solution?

The Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN) provides a way. IHN enables religious groups to unite hearts and hands to provide shelter, meals, and compassionate assistance for homeless families. By uniting eight to thirteen congregations, plus day centers and social service agencies, an IHN program can do what individuals alone cannot do.

For many congregations, helping those in need fulfills a biblical, traditional mission. Thousands of volunteers and hundreds of religious communities already participate in IHN programs and have helped homeless families attain more stable lives. Congregations have found that the Network provides an effective way to be involved in a hands-on outreach program that serves the poor, and also fosters congregational unity and interfaith cooperation.

In the IHN program, a Host congregation furnishes clean, safe, overnight lodging and nutritious meals for three to five families (up to fourteen guests) for one week every two or three months. During Host Week, other congregations may provide additional volunteers to support the Host group: making healthy breakfasts and suppers, playing with children or helping them study, and talking with parents after a long day.

Why an IHN Program?

1. Because the Interfaith Hospitality Network works. Over 70% of the families who participate in IHN programs find permanent housing; guests without jobs often find them, or enter job training programs.
2. Because sheltering homeless families is often too involved for one congregation to do alone.

IHN PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

IHN programs are formed primarily from existing resources so they can be implemented quickly, without major start-up costs. Programs vary from community to community, reflecting local needs and resources. However, there are five basic components to an IHN program:

1. Host Congregations
2. Volunteers
3. Social Service Agencies
4. Day Center
5. Transportation

1. Host Congregations

About five times a year, for one week at a time. Host congregations provide overnight lodging, meals (supper, breakfast, and brown-bag lunch), and hospitality.

Hosting rotates among the eight to thirteen Host congregations in the Network, which provide lodging for three to five families (up to fourteen individuals) from 6:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. the next morning.

2. Volunteers

Volunteers are the heart of the Network; without them, it cannot exist. Volunteers provide a variety of services: cooking and serving meals, playing with children or helping them with homework, and staying overnight.

Beyond providing lodging and meals, volunteers interact with the guests, treating them with respect and responding with compassion.

3. Social Service Agencies

Local social service agencies screen guests and refer families to the Network. The agencies may also help guests find housing, jobs, and government entitlements. Since the IHN program is staffed by volunteers, the social service agencies screen guests for active substance abuse or psychiatric problems.

4. Day Center

Guests use a local day center, such as a YMCA, from 8:00 am. to 5:00 p.m. to shower, care for pre-school children, and seek employment. Many guests are employed during the day and go to work. During the school year, children go to school. The day center provides guests with a mailing address and a home base from which to conduct their housing search.

5. Transportation

An IHN-supplied van transports guests to and from the day center. The van also carries bedding and luggage to the next Host congregation.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN BEING A HOST CONGREGATION?

Housing Accommodations

IHN Host congregations provide accommodations for up to fourteen people for a week at a time on-site at their religious facilities. The rooms include sleeping areas, a dining area, a relaxing area, and two bathrooms. These suggestions are flexible; congregations have accommodated guests in a variety of ways.

Sleeping areas:

Religious education rooms often serve as private bedrooms for each family. Some congregations divide large rooms with free-standing partitions.

Dining/relaxing area:

This area usually includes tables for eating and doing homework, a few easy chairs, a TV and a children's activity area that is stocked with games and toys. Meals are cooked by volunteers, either at home or in the Host kitchen, and guests and hosts dine together.

The rooms should be close enough together for efficient management and clearly marked so that guests understand which rooms are available to them.

Facility Scheduling

Congregations are busy places, particularly in the evenings. Adjustments to accommodate the IHN program are usually easy to make, however, because hosting schedules are set several months in advance. During Host Week, a change of meeting room may be all that is necessary to free up adequate space for guests.

Volunteers

Volunteers in the IHN program provide homeless families with basic human needs - shelter, safety, and sustenance - with a spirit of warmth and hospitality. They provide both the "people power" to get the jobs done, and the personal support and compassion that homeless families need. In addition to furnishing meals, overnight hosting and other program requirements, volunteers do simple but immeasurably important things. They talk to guests. They listen to them. They treat them with respect. Volunteers can be a source of hope, when hope has been lost.

Hosting offers a volunteer opportunity for everyone in the congregation. Members of men's, singles', youth, elders', women's clubs and other groups may choose particular areas like preparing meals, homework/tutoring, arranging play activities or crafts projects, setting up/taking down beds, and so on. Once involved, many volunteers go on to help guest families find housing or jobs, and assist with resume writing or budgeting.

During Host Week, a congregation might typically require thirty to fifty volunteers. The congregation's lead volunteer, also called the "Primary Coordinator," oversees the hospitality program within the congregation and works with assistants who plan the menus, schedule the volunteers, stock the pantry with supplies, and oversee donations.

Here is a typical volunteer schedule for the Host facility:

5:30 p.m. - 8:30 p.m. - Supper and Evening Volunteers

8:30 p.m. - 6:00 a.m. - Overnight Volunteers

6:00 a.m. - 7:00 a.m. - Breakfast Volunteers

This schedule shares the work and allows adults, teenagers, and even children, to find their niche as volunteers.

Supplies

The Network provides much of the essential equipment: folding cots, blankets, mattress covers, pillows, and van transport. Each Host congregation provides some items: sheets, towels, wash cloths, food, dinnerware, lunch/sandwich bags, first aid kit, toys, TV books, games, soap, and diapers. Typically, friends or members of the congregation donate specialized equipment such as cribs, playpens, or high chairs.

Cost to the Host Congregation

The cost of food staples and supplies averages \$200 for the Host Week. Additional costs for electricity and heat may also arise. Local stores or institutions frequently contribute food items and supplies.

Insurance

Normally, a congregation's property and liability policy covers all the elements of a congregation's mission - including providing shelter and hospitality. Congregations interested in becoming Hosts should check with their insurance agents.

The Host Week

On Sunday afternoon, when the van arrives with cots and other supplies, the Host Week begins. As the guests arrive from the day center, volunteers welcome them and show them their accommodations.

After the volunteers prepare supper and dine with their guests, guests and volunteers chat or watch TV; children do their homework or play. Two volunteers stay overnight with the guests.

In the morning, the guests eat breakfast and make a bagged lunch to go. After breakfast the IHN van takes the guests to the day center where they shower, take their children to school, and go to work. Some of the guests use the day center to meet with social workers, look for housing, and seek employment.

Local Network Management

A Board of Trustees and a salaried Network Director serve each Network. The Network Director, who has professional social work experience, works with the guest families, Host Coordinators, and social service agencies. The Board of Trustees oversees the management of the Network.

Initial Network Costs

During the first year, an IHN program spends between \$50,000 and \$75,000 for cots, office expenses, program materials, insurance, transportation, and the Network Director's salary. Start-up expenses may vary widely depending upon the number of items and services donated. These funds and initial contributions are raised by the local IHN Board through appeals to individuals, congregations, foundations, and corporations.

NATIONAL INTERFAITH HOSPITALITY NETWORK

NIHN is a national, non-profit organization that assists religious and community organizations in developing and operating Network programs.

Our goal is to alleviate homelessness by fostering the development of Networks that provide shelter, meals and assistance for homeless persons, and that increase community involvement in direct service and advocacy

NIHN offers speakers, videotapes, guides and manuals for successful programs. Individuals or groups interested in obtaining information or assistance concerning the development of an Interfaith Hospitality Network should contact:



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