

THE MINISTRY OF A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

Beds for children becomes a mission focus

BY TAMMY WARREN

No one knows exactly how many children in the Detroit area are in need of a bed of their own, but it is likely the number is in the thousands, according to the nonprofit organization Building Beds 4 Kids (BB4K).

Last fall, the Presbytery of Detroit, which has accepted the Matthew 25 invitation extended by the Presbyterian Mission Agency, stepped up to help these children and held a bed-building event. Nearly two dozen volunteers from nine congregations gathered at the BB4K warehouse. In just over two hours, they assembled 68 beds, which were distributed by churches and social service agencies to children and youth in Michigan's tri-county area of Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties.

"One of the most basic needs of children in the child welfare system — ages 2 to 18 — is for a warm, comfortable bed and a good night's sleep," said the Rev. Dr. Kathryn "Kate"

Thoresen, coordinator of the statewide Faith Communities Coalition on Foster Care and parish associate for foster and/or adoptive families' partnerships at First Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Michigan.

More than 12,500 children were in the state's foster care system as of Jan. 1, the lowest number in care since 2016, according to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. Interventions like providing beds not only provide a comfortable night's rest for children and youth, but also address poverty issues that may help keep families together, according to Thoresen.

"One judge told me that nearly 40% of the children he sees that go into foster care are the result of 'environmental neglect,' that is the parents not being able to provide adequate shelter," she said.

Thoresen and her husband, Tom, who have three adult children and two grandchildren, have also served as respite foster parents. Through





this experience, they have both developed a personal understanding of the needs of children in the child welfare system, especially those in foster care. Thoresen said it is crucial for people of faith to be proactive, such as donating furniture and household goods when downsizing, so that these items can be passed along to struggling families.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) reports that not getting enough sleep each night is associated with an increase in injuries, hypertension, obesity and depression, especially for teens who may experience increased risk of self-harm or suicidal thoughts. The AAP also found that getting adequate sleep on a regular basis can lead to improved attention, behavior, learning, memory, and mental and physical health.

“We see that providing beds for every child who needs one is an

CHARLOTTE SOMMERS

Volunteers from nine congregations in the Presbytery of Detroit assembled 68 beds in a little over two hours.



BILL ZIELE

Volunteers in the “Now I Lay Me Down” bed ministry at First Presbyterian Church of Monroe in Michigan work in pairs to install beds.

effective way to prevent kids from going into foster care in the first place,” Thoresen said. “We are also discovering that there are many grandparents who suddenly need beds when challenged to take in grandkids.”

‘Now I Lay Me Down’

First Presbyterian Church of Monroe in Michigan has been giving beds to children and youth who need them for nearly two decades.

Since 2001, the “Now I Lay Me Down” bed ministry at the church has provided more than 3,500 beds

for youngsters from before birth to age 16. The program has been a model for other churches, like Firelands Presbyterian Church in Port Clinton, Ohio, which launched a bed ministry in 2015 and recently received a \$20,000 grant through the Thank Offering of Presbyterian Women.

People in need hear about the bed ministry at First Presbyterian Church of Monroe by word of mouth or through agencies and community sponsors. There is an application process, and the need for a bed must be verified by a reliable

referral source, such as a Michigan Department of Health and Human Services worker, a pastor, landlord or home visitor.

The need for beds for children and adolescents came to light when two members of the church’s mission committee suggested launching a child-focused ministry by first hearing the perspectives of people in the community. These mission committee members were inspired, nearly two decades ago, by the Presbyterian Planning Calendar’s 2000–01 “Year of the Child” theme.

For several months, guest speakers, such as law enforcement, social service providers, educators and others proposed what they felt were the greatest unmet needs of children in Monroe County. After gathering data, the committee’s chair at the time, Sue Flaherty, said, “We know what we want to do. We want to buy beds for children who are sleeping on the floor in Monroe County.”

The Rev. Dean McGormley, stated clerk of the Maumee Valley Presbytery, who served 17 years as co-pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Monroe, along with his wife, the Rev. Dr. Ellen McGormley, said it took about “half a second to approve it” and half an hour to discuss it.

“When you are sleeping on the floor in Michigan, in our extreme weather, it could get below zero,” said Kim Hooper, a volunteer since the church’s bed ministry began. “Some parents don’t know where to turn.”

Hooper considers the bed ministry a health and education program, adding that if a person doesn’t believe that to “go home tonight and lay down on your kitchen floor and sleep there, then get up and see how well you are ready to go to work in the morning.”

First Presbyterian Church of Monroe buys the beds through a local furniture company. A twin bed with



all of the bedding and accessories costs \$200–\$250. The all-volunteer ministry currently has about 30 people from the congregation, as well as other churches and organizations in the community. Volunteers use their own vehicles to make the bed deliveries. They work in pairs to deliver and set up the beds. Every delivery includes a new mattress and box spring, mattress cover, pillow, sheets, a blanket or handmade quilt, a stuffed animal and a book appropriate to the age of the child or youth.

A local chapter of the nonprofit Project Linus provides blankets, and the quilt ministry of St. Luke’s Lutheran Church donates quilts for the ministry to distribute along with the beds. In addition, the American Red Cross provides smoke detectors, which bed ministry volunteers install in homes without a working smoke detector. This is done simultaneously with the bed delivery and setup.

Turning nightmares into dreams

Over the years there have been many stories to keep volunteers motivated in meeting the increasing need for beds for children and adolescents in Monroe County. One young girl, for example, tested positive for lead poisoning. She had been eating the peeling lead-based paint from the floor where she slept. Having a bed got her off the floor and away from this health hazard, at least while she was sleeping.

And then there was a military family with three children, ages 5, 7 and 10, who hardly had any furniture and no refrigerator. They’d been keeping food cold using a small cooler on the back porch, Hooper says. This family was paying off medical expenses incurred when their youngest was born with a congenital heart defect. Hooper and his wife were moving and were able to provide a couch and chair, another family provided a refrigerator and stove, and each of the children received a bed of



MARSIALLE ARBUCKLE

Scouts work in teams to assemble beds, assisting a member of their troop who chose helping children in his community for his Eagle Scout project.

their own.

“Those are the extremes of who we serve,” Hooper said. “A lot of parents are unemployed. That’s why it’s nice that we can step in and help them.”

To fund the “Now I Lay Me Down” bed ministry, First Presbyterian Church of Monroe has two major annual fundraisers — a “Bed Race to Aid Children” and a “Sled Race to Aid Children.”

“We usually raise about \$30,000 a year through the bed race,” Hooper said, adding that the race is fun to watch.

The sled race, held for the first time during the “Christmas in Ida Festival” last year, was a hit, Hooper said. For one night the beds became sleds adorned with Christmas lights in the festival’s parade.

“It came off well. Everything fell in place,” Hooper said of the inaugural sled race. “You know, sometimes you think it’s God telling you, ‘I’ll provide.’”

Tammy Warren is a communications associate with the Presbyterian Mission Agency.



KIM HOOPER

An annual Bed Race to Aid Children helps fund the “Now I Lay Me Down” bed ministry at First Presbyterian Church of Monroe in Michigan.