



### **EDAR's Mission**

The mission of EDAR (Everyone Deserves a Roof) is to provide short-term, immediate shelter to homeless individuals and families. We distribute mobile shelter units through a network of partnerships in order to reduce the number of individuals sleeping in the open and to support their dignity and hope.

### **What We Do**

EDAR (Everyone Deserves A Roof) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides unique mobile shelters to the homeless. Each EDAR unit is a four-wheeled unit, based on a mobile cart design allowing for storage during the day and at night, provides a comfortable place to sleep with protection from the elements.

EDAR launched the first sixty units in the Southern California area after approximately nine prototypes. The units are currently in use in Los Angeles and surrounding counties as well as Arizona and Colorado. With the help of our generous supporters, we continue to place additional units in Southern California and expand to other cities nationwide.

### **Who We Serve**

EDAR partners with a network of philanthropic, governmental and homeless advocacy organizations to assist in the distribution of EDAR units. For individuals who are not affiliated with one of these organizations and would like an EDAR unit, EDAR will refer an individual to an organization so that they may receive a unit.

EDAR units are used in a variety of modalities determined by both the needs of the distributing agency and homeless client. In all cases, we ask the distributing agency to collect feedback from the EDAR user and in some situations, the EDAR unit has become a "first step" for those that are typically reluctant to enter a traditional shelter system.

### **Why EDAR?**

- Each year, more than 3 million people experience homelessness in the United States.<sup>i</sup>
- More than 1.5 million children are homeless annually in the United States. That's one in every 50 American children.<sup>ii</sup>
- Twelve major U.S. cities nationally surveyed have reported an increase in homelessness because of the foreclosure crisis.<sup>iii</sup>
- The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities recently reported that food stamp caseloads have increased dramatically in recent months, rising by 2.6 million people or 9.6 percent between August 2007 and August 2008.<sup>iv</sup>

<sup>i</sup> National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty;

<sup>ii</sup> National Center on Family Homelessness, One in 50 U.S. Children is Homeless, Mar. 13, 2009

<sup>iii</sup> The United States Conference of Mayors, Hunger and Homelessness Survey, Dec. 2008

<sup>iv</sup> Sharon Parrott, Recession Could Cause Large Increases in Poverty and Push Millions Into Deep Poverty: Stimulus Package Should Include Policies To Ameliorate Harsh Effects of Downturn, Center for Budget and Policy Priorities: Washington, DC (Nov. 2008)



**EVERYONE  
DESERVES  
A ROOF**

*"Thinking  
outside  
the box"*



Photo: Nick Stern



Photo: Nick Stern



Photo: Joe Ravetz



Photo: EDAR

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## Frequently Asked Questions

### **Why do homeless individuals use EDAR units? Aren't shelter beds more comfortable?**

Absolutely! But many who are homeless are not comfortable living in shelters and many shelters offer only temporary accommodation. Plus, in many larger cities, the shelters are at or above maximum capacity and do not have the funds to pay for more shelters. EDAR *for sure* is not as good as permanent shelter, but it is much better than a cardboard box under a freeway overpass.

### **Does EDAR work with other organizations to address related problems of homelessness?**

EDAR partners with a network of philanthropic, governmental and homeless advocacy organizations to assist in the distribution of EDAR units. For individuals who are not affiliated with one of these organizations and would like an EDAR unit, we will refer an individual to an organization so that they may receive a unit. Additionally, Members of our board and advisory board are very much involved with the homeless communities.

### **What security does EDAR offer to an individual from crime?**

Living rough on our streets is inherently dangerous. In "day mode", EDAR secures personal belongings by the use of locks. In "night mode", there are translucent windows that help each person remain aware of their surroundings. We work with our shelter partners to provide land on their property that will provide additional safety and storage.

### **Please describe an EDAR community.**

EDAR communities are made up of 10-15 EDAR units creating a dormitory effect on land provided by a local authority or private entity. Restroom and shower facilities are integrated into the community and EDAR works with local homeless agencies to provide additional social services to the residents of the community. The Dome Village of Downtown Los Angeles was an example of a successful attempt to make use of unused land by providing a ready made community.

### **Are EDARs hard for homeless individuals to operate?**

We currently have EDAR users ranging from petite women to strong men and in a spectrum of ages. When designing the EDAR units, we ensured that EDAR was stronger than the average supermarket cart many homeless use. We developed wheels that are better than a supermarket cart's, being slightly larger and easier to steer in a consistent fashion. We have also included a brake and locking mechanism which ensures the unit will not move on its own.



# A Roof On Wheels For The Homeless

## CBS Evening News: L.A. Nonprofit Designs Carts That Provide Temporary Shelter

LOS ANGELES, Feb. 16, 2009  
By Ben Tracy

To view the video version of this story, please visit:

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/02/16/eveningnews/main4804824.shtml?tag=currentVideoInfo;videoMetaInfo>

**(CBS)** A long day on Los Angeles' skid row is about to turn into an even longer night.

**CBS News correspondent Ben Tracy** reports on another housing crisis - where people have nowhere to live but the streets.

"This is a beast unlike anything I have ever seen before," said Montgomery Garnett, who has lived on the streets for nearly three years.

He said that those who don't get on a bus to nearby shelters face a cold, hard reality.

"It is just bodies lying all over the streets," Garnett said.

When night falls, everyone finds their spot - they will spend the night on the sidewalk.

Garnett used to sleep on the concrete, until a couple of weeks ago when a cart landed on his sidewalk.

It's a cart by day that doubles as a mini camper at night. It's called [EDAR](#) - Everyone Deserves A Roof.

"It's basically a portable bed, which is nice," Garnett said. "Off the ground."

Hollywood producer Peter Samuelson helped create the mobile shelter. A much needed idea in Los Angeles County where 73,000 people are homeless, yet there are less than 21,000 beds in shelters.

"How can we go to bed at night knowing that there are men, women, and small children sleeping on pieces of cardboard, laying on damp concrete?" Samuelson asked.



So far, 60 EDARs have been made at a grocery cart factory in Los Angeles. At a cost of \$500 each, they want to raise enough money to make 10,000 more by the end of this year. Some are sent to shelters for overflow beds.

Brenda Gardenhire is teaching herself new skills in the hopes of finding a job.

"My little portable home ... my little apartment," Gardenhire said. "I'm so happy I have it."

She now has somewhere to come home to.

At night, the EDAR helps Garnett sleep easier. During the day, he can't help but show it off.

"This is the first step in fulfilling the American Dream which is getting my own home," Garnett said. "So this is a start."

And, as **Tracy** reports, a push in the right direction.

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## Tents on wheels give homeless people roof and pride

- Story Highlights
- A Los Angeles-based charity has begun distributing makeshift tents
- Charity was brainchild of "Revenge of the Nerds" movie producer Peter Samuelson
- "This is \$500 to get a man or a woman or a child off the damp concrete," he says
- Homeless man: "Everybody calls it the hobo condo"

By Ted Rowlands and Wayne Drash  
CNN

**LOS ANGELES, California (CNN)** -- Brenda Gardenhire shows off her new home with pride. It looks like an oversized shopping cart covered with a khaki canvas. But to her, it's "wonderful" -- a stepping stone to get her off the streets and get her life back in order.

"It's like your own home, your own apartment, your own room," she said, showing off the 7-foot-long living space on wheels. "No one else can come in here but me."

Gardenhire is talking about her makeshift home called an EDAR, which stands for Everyone Deserves A Roof. The units are being distributed to homeless people in the Los Angeles area by the Everyone Deserves A Roof nonprofit organization.



It's the brainchild of "Revenge of the Nerds" movie producer Peter Samuelson, who has spent much of his life working with charities to help impoverished children.

He got the idea to help the homeless in recent years as he rode his bicycle from Los Angeles to the beach at Santa Monica.

On those bike rides, he began seeing more and more homeless people. But he didn't just whiz by. He stopped to talk with them -- 62 people in all. One by one, he listened to their needs and what they wanted most: a roof over their heads. And the idea for the EDAR was born.

"If you had to define the value of a civilization, it's not how many SUVs you've got," Samuelson said. "To me, I think it's how well do we take care of our children, our homeless people, our mentally ill, those less fortunate."

He partnered with the Pasadena Art Center College of Design for a design contest and the current contraption was created. Each unit costs about \$500 to make.

The four-wheeled home has an expandable base that stays off the ground and is covered by a canvas, giving it the feel of a tent. It extends 86 inches and is 32 inches wide, thin enough to fit through standard doorways. Each unit has a mattress and sleeping bag to provide comfort. It's

also flame-retardant and sturdy enough to keep its occupants dry during heavy rains. A braking mechanism prevents the unit from rolling away at night. They also come with a chain and padlock to prevent it from being stolen.

Samuelson said he initially wanted to build more permanent shelters for all of the homeless people in the Los Angeles area. "But when you do the math, you're looking at \$3 billion to get 60,000 people off the damp concrete, and that's just in L.A.," he said, explaining why he opted for the cheaper EDAR instead of permanent shelters.



He said the EDAR isn't a perfect solution, but it's a good, economical stopgap. "This is \$500 to get a man or a woman or a child off the damp concrete," he said. "I don't think it's the best. ... But for now, I think a little bit of privacy -- not being rained on, not sleeping on the ground, not getting pneumonia from the damp -- has a little bit of value."

Jose Font, 50, agrees. He got an EDAR late last year. He said he's been homeless off and on since 1979. He slept on a tarp with a blanket and worked on computer repairs before he became one of about 60 people to get an EDAR.

"Everybody calls it the hobo condo. Everybody envies me because I sleep on a mattress inside," he said. "It makes me feel like I've got something to come to. It feels more like a home than just a tarp and concrete."

He added, "It's light as a feather when I push it. I can put it anywhere."

Font keeps it locked to a telephone on public property when he's away.

James Ramirez, a social worker with the Venice Community Housing Corporation, said he has been able to use the EDAR as incentive to get people's lives back on track.

"What we're doing is using the EDAR as a carrot for them to come in to see us," Ramirez said. "They want the EDAR because they want to keep dry when it's raining and they want a place to stay at night that's comfortable. So we're using this to connect with them."

"For us, it's working really well," he said. "This is their home. This is what they're proud of at this moment. ... It means a step in the right direction to get back into society."

The EDAR organization says it's starting with baby steps. In addition to the 60 units already given out, another 110 units have been ordered. The units are distributed to shelters, churches and other organizations that help the homeless. Those groups then distribute the units. The EDAR group tries to stay in phone contact with its users every week or two.

EDAR currently has about 30 people on a waiting list, plus another 10 shelters in the Los Angeles area. The organization is also looking at land provided by a local authority where they could let women and families stay on a site that also has functioning bathrooms.

EDAR has fielded dozens more calls from across the country and around the world about the units. Samuelson said they're "studying what works best" and looking at an array of options.

"People talk about the homeless as if it's some homogeneous group of drunken, unemployed, too-lazy-to-get-a-job men. They're totally wrong. They need to come meet people," he said. "What's the point in having a society if it's devoid of helping people less fortunate?"

He added, "As we raise money, we will get people off the concrete."

For Brenda Gardenhire, that means the world.

"It's a step up to you. It's like you're making progress," she said. "Now, I have me a little place to stay. I'm moving up."

CNN's Traci Tamura and Gregg Canes contributed to this report.

# GOOD *The Design of Everyday Life*

## LOOK: Shopping Cart Becomes Housing Start

By Allison Arieff on April 28, 2010

Los Angeles has the largest homeless population in the country. In a city where people spend so much time in their cars, it's a population that many tend to ignore. But not Peter Samuelson. About five years ago, on a typical weekend bike ride, Samuelson began to notice an increase in the number of people living on the streets. After counting 62 homeless individuals on his route from West L.A. to the beach, he decided he had to do something...Soon after, his unique homeless shelter concept emerged.



Though Samuelson had previously founded three children's aid nonprofits, he was a media executive not a designer or engineer. He felt he had a good idea for a new form of shelter—he just needed a way to realize it. He started talking directly to the homeless and asking them what they needed. These conversations led him to envision a cart that could unfold into a bed, and after discovering that many of the people with whom he spoke survived on money earned by recycling, he wanted to make sure the cart facilitated that. Privacy—another important issue—meant the cart had to have a means to be secured.



To help transform these ideas into reality, he contacted the Arts Center College of Design in Pasadena, through which he met designers Eric Lindeman and Jason Zasa. The trio finessed their shelter design and took their drawing to Precision Wire, a shopping cart manufacturer in the City of Commerce. After several prototypes, a beta version of EDAR (Everyone Deserves a Roof), a four-wheeled mobile unit based on a shopping cart, was born.

Today, some 170 EDARs are in use with an additional 50 to be distributed next month. Samuelson's non-profit group partners with philanthropic, governmental, and homeless advocacy organizations to distribute the units. Most are sheltering homeless in the Greater Los Angeles area; other units are being tested in Phoenix, Arizona, Camden, New

Jersey and Denver Colorado. EDAR is exploring expansion opportunities in various other communities such as Austin, San Francisco and New York.

Some might suggest that providing such durable shelters only serves to encourage homelessness. “Yes, they are more comfortable in an EDAR unit, but I don’t think that is giving them an incentive to remain homeless,” EDAR’s Executive Director Julie Yurth Himot responds. “In fact, we had one woman recently who had an EDAR and was labeled ‘chronically homeless.’ After three weeks, she said that the EDAR reminded her of what it was like to sleep in a real bed and that she wanted to get out of the EDAR and into transitional housing ASAP. She kicked her drug habit and is currently in a transitional housing program.”

Not all EDAR stories are equally rosy, but the fact remains, as Himot explains, “there are just too many people homeless right now. This recession has brought an enormous amount of people into shelters. These families have never been homeless and it doesn’t seem to be stopping.”

Samuelson saw a problem and wanted to help solve it. With over 3 million people, half of them children, experiencing homelessness each year, he couldn’t stand by and do nothing. Not finding the right solution, he created one on his own.

<http://www.good.is/post/look-shopping-cart-becomes-housing-start/>

*This post originally appeared on [www.refresheverything.com](http://www.refresheverything.com), as part of GOOD's collaboration with the Pepsi Refresh Project, a catalyst for world-changing ideas. [Find out more about the Refresh campaign](#), or to [submit your own idea](#) today.*

COLUMN ONE

## Upgrading from a cardboard box for the homeless

The EDAR, a cross between a shopping cart and a pop-up camper, is a step up.



Film producer and philanthropist Peter Samuelson sits in one of the mobile shelters he developed. The EDAR, short for Everyone Deserves a Roof, features bins to hold cans, bottles and other recyclables collected by day. It folds out to create a sleeping platform, topped by a canvas cover with zippers and windows. (Christina House / For The Times / November 21, 2008)

By Martha Groves  
December 10, 2008

Christopher Raynor's father kicked him out when he was 13, after his stepmother interrupted an orgy in his bedroom and the teen jammed a broom handle against her throat.

Now 40, Raynor has lived much of his life in the rough. His current domicile is a patch of dirt behind some pampas grass and coastal sage scrub where Pacific Coast Highway meets Temescal Canyon Road, in the backyard of Pacific Palisades.

Until a few weeks ago, he dozed on a thin mattress in the open air. Now he beds down in a snug mobile shelter called an EDAR (short for Everyone Deserves a Roof), a covered contraption that

looks like the offspring of a shopping cart and a pop-up camper.

Raynor's mother died of stomach cancer, his father was shot to death, and he himself has served time in jail. He spends much of each day intoxicated and grimy. He despises most people.

But he likes his EDAR.

"This is one of the greatest damn gifts you could ever give to anybody," he says.

The EDAR is the brainchild of Peter Samuelson, a philanthropist and film producer whose credits include "Revenge of the Nerds" and "Arlington Road." His life could hardly be more different from Raynor's.

Samuelson grew up in a middle-class London household where performing charitable work was expected. His father, Sydney, founded Samuelson Film Service, a supplier of film and TV equipment, and in 1995 was knighted for his service to the British film industry.

Peter Samuelson went to Cambridge University on a full scholarship, earned a master's degree in English literature and became fluent in French. He started in the film business as an interpreter for U.S. companies operating in Africa and Europe.

In 1975, after living off and on in Los Angeles, he settled here permanently, married an accountant and had four children.

"If you become an American on purpose, it's a very special thing," Samuelson, 57, said over breakfast at Nate'n Al deli in Beverly Hills. "America is not just a land of opportunity but also of personal responsibility. There's an obligation to lift up society."

In 1982, that obligation smacked Samuelson in the face when a cousin in London introduced him to a boy with an inoperable brain tumor. The child's great wish was to see Disneyland. Samuelson and his cousin footed the bill to fly the boy and his mother to Los Angeles for a two-week whirlwind of wish fulfillment.

"He went back to London clutching his Mickey Mouse ears and died," Samuelson said.

The experience prompted Samuelson to start the Starlight Foundation, an international charity that provides psychological and social services to seriously ill children and their families.

In 1990, he brought together director Steven Spielberg and Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, among others, to create the Starbright Foundation, which develops software and other products to help children cope with the medical, emotional and social challenges of their illnesses. In 2004, Starlight and Starbright merged to become the Starlight Starbright Children's Foundation. Another Samuelson charity, First Star, advocates for abused and neglected children.

Three years ago, on his twice-weekly bike rides to the beach from his Holmby Hills house, Samuelson realized that he was seeing more homeless people. For three weeks, he interviewed

dozens of them -- men, women and children.

"Where do you spend the night?" he asked one woman. She led him by the hand into the bushes and showed him a large cardboard Sub-Zero box.

"That was my epiphany moment," Samuelson said. "I've got the refrigerator. She's got the box. What is wrong with this picture?"

A 2007 homeless census revealed that on any given day there were more than 73,000 homeless people in Los Angeles County. (Some critics contend the number is overstated.) Downtown's skid row had the greatest concentration, with more than 5,000.

Samuelson said he was shocked by the demographics: About 60% of the homeless were men, 24% were women, and 15% were under 18. (Adult transgender individuals accounted for the rest.)

"I've always believed society is defined by how we deal with our weakest links," he said. "The best of America is when we take care of the less fortunate."

His first instinct was to build shelters, but then he did the math. Building a bed in a facility runs \$50,000 to \$100,000. The cost to house all of the county's street denizens would run into the billions. Besides, many of them resist services. So he thought: What is there that's better than a damp box on a rainy night even if it's not as good as a bed?

The idea of a mobile, single-person shelter popped to mind.

Samuelson sponsored a contest at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena to design his "widget."

Eric Lindeman and Jason Zasa took the honors, with a mobile shopping cart-like apparatus. The cart features bins to hold cans, bottles and other recyclables collected by day. It folds out to create a sleeping platform, topped by a canvas cover with zippers and windows.

Samuelson labeled it an EDAR, and established the EDAR Foundation, whose slogan is: "Thinking outside the box."

With a donation from former EBay President Jeff Skoll, he took the design to Precision Wire Products, a manufacturer of shopping carts in Commerce. Precision produced a succession of prototypes, at least nine, to address critiques of the device: too big, too small, too flimsy, not readily collapsible. The units have been thrown down flights of stairs (they're sturdy) and left in the rain (they don't leak).

Three months ago, Samuelson decided to distribute 60 EDARs for testing. With the help of churches, missions and shelters, he and his assistants identified chronically homeless people who could benefit from an EDAR in the short term and might be willing to develop a lasting relationship with service providers.

After Dehanka Straughter was laid off from her job as a cook at a Compton preschool, she and her two sons, ages 2 and 6, were evicted from their \$975-a-month apartment.

They sold their furniture, stored some possessions in Straughter's unregistered car and stayed with family and friends for a few weeks. When Straughter saw people sleeping on the streets, she thought "that's where we'd be next." Then a friend told her that women and children could find temporary quarters at the Union Rescue Mission in downtown Los Angeles.

Now the petite Straughter, 27, sleeps in an EDAR with her boys on the fourth floor of the mission. They like it better than she does. "The kids adjust to anything," she said. "They think they're camping."

Still, she says, "I'm happy to have a place to bathe and eat and sleep."

With the economy sinking, mission Chief Executive Andy Bales is making room for more mothers with children and hopes to provide EDARs -- indoors -- for many of them. The EDAR Foundation provided 17 units; the mission has asked to buy 100 more, some for use in its winter shelter.

Bales hope that with mass production, the price will drop to \$400 from just under \$500.

"They make a nice cot and provide a lot of privacy," he said. "I had a 6-foot-7 friend lie down in one. He was comfortable."

Raynor learned about EDAR from homeless acquaintances. A high school dropout and former construction worker, Raynor had spent three years in jail for auto theft and forgery. With police after him in Texas and his home state of Missouri, he went to Arizona. He left there in search of more temperate weather and found it next to Pacific Coast Highway.

As traffic rushed by one recent starry Friday night, Raynor reminisced about his brushes with the law. Beer can in hand, he spoke of jumping a freight train to Texas to search for a friend's missing 13-year-old daughter. Wielding a sawed-off shotgun, he banged down a door and tied up two men who he thought knew her whereabouts. "How was I to know they were cops working on a sting operation?" he said.

Recently, a woman he described as his fiancée was struck and killed by a driver on PCH. Not long after, a male friend suffered the same fate, he said. The woman he'd married in Arizona disappeared from his life. He shares his PCH-adjacent turf with a woman named Yolanda, whose speech has been slurred by alcohol and a head injury.

Raynor said his EDAR is "very comfortable," cooled by sea breezes by day and made cozy by his body heat at night.

"It's about time someone took an initiative for people less fortunate than themselves," he said.

In October, the EDAR won \$10,000 in an innovation contest sponsored by Los Angeles Social Venture Partners, the Social Enterprise Institute and the USC Stevens Institute for Innovation. The

EDAR Foundation ([www.edar.org](http://www.edar.org)) is seeking donations to produce more of the mobile shelters.

Students at Rand Corp., the Santa Monica think tank, are interviewing EDAR users and representatives of shelters and missions to assess how the units might fit into a system of comprehensive care for the homeless.

"The goal is to find out who will benefit most from this unit and therefore what the distribution plan should look like," said Barbara Raymond, a consultant working on the study. Raymond sees possibilities for EDARs in refugee camps and for victims of natural disasters.

Meanwhile, lawyers are sorting out legal issues. Will municipal codes allow users to park their units anywhere? What about constitutional questions and not-in-my-backyard complaints?

Erwin Chemerinsky, dean of the UC Irvine School of Law, said police fear the units could constitute dwellings where inhabitants would have a reasonable expectation of privacy. In that scenario, police would need warrants to search EDARs, which could become havens for drug use or prostitution. Chemerinsky maintains that cities could allow the units in designated public places as long as users consented to be searched, much like travelers entering an airport.

Samuelson anticipates those and other objections to his invention. Does the EDAR enable homelessness by making it more bearable? No, he insists.

"Why is the EDAR not regressive?" he said. "Because it is not nearly as good as a shelter bed. There's no pretense it's as good as permanent or temporary brick-and-mortar housing." But it is, he says, "infinitely better than a damp cardboard box."

Groves is a Times staff writer.

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## New Sleeping Option for the Homeless: Portable Beds

KTLA News

December 10, 2008

LOS ANGELES -- A Hollywood movie producer has produced something that goes far beyond the big screen -- he's giving homeless a sheltered bed to call their own.

Peter Samuelson, whose film producing credits include "Revenge of the Nerds" and "Arlington Road," created the mobile shelter called EDAR (for Everyone Deserves a Roof).



The contraption looks like a shopping cart with a pop-up camper.

He says the idea for EDAR hit him three years ago while on a daily bike ride.

"My epiphany was that I met a woman and when I was doing my interviews I asked her, 'where do you sleep at night, my dear?' And she said come with me, and she took my hand, and off of the 405 Freeway, behind the bushes, there was a huge cardboard box with some plastic draped over it and it had been raining and it was disgusting and it stank and it was awful," Samuelson told KTLA.

Samuelson thought about building shelters, but the cost to house all of the county's homeless would run into the billions. Also, many of them resist services. His temporary solution was the EDAR, which costs about \$500 to make.

Lawyers are sorting out legal issues with the EDAR, like whether municipal codes will allow users to park their mobile units anywhere. There have also been some not-in-my-backyard complaints from people who fear the EDARS will start popping up everywhere.

Another issue of concern is whether the units could constitute dwellings where inhabitants would have a reasonable expectation of privacy. In that case, police would need search warrants to search EDARS, which could become havens for drug use and prostitution.

Samuelson admits an EDAR is not nearly as good as a shelter bed, but on a rainy night, it sure beats a damp cardboard box.

## Los Angeles County shelters brim with families

Vouchers for motel rooms are growing scarce as bad economy, bad weather take their toll. At the Union Rescue Mission downtown, mothers with children tell how they cope with their circumstances.



Carmelita Robertson and daughter Jaira, 2, occupy a private, tented cot inside the Union Rescue Mission in downtown Los Angeles. Robertson said they lived in a motel room until they ran out of government vouchers. (Photo: Barbara Davidson / Los Angeles Times)

December 18, 2008

By Jessica Garrison

With her 5-week-old baby asleep face-down across her lap, Erica Richardson settled into a chair at the Union Rescue Mission and reviewed her strategies for staying sane while living with an infant in a homeless shelter.

The key is to get away from the shelter during the day, the tired-looking 33-year-old said. Head to the park, to a friend's house, to any place where she can pretend, for a while anyway, that she is just another mom on an outing.

And, she added, placing a hand protectively on the sleeping form of her son Lonnie, "I just pray every day."

A homeless mother sitting next to her -- who was also juggling an infant on her lap as well as tending to a 2-year-old in a stroller -- nodded vigorously. "I was getting ready to say the same thing," said Cheirre Copeland. Then she leaned forward to offer some survival tricks of her own.

The economic crisis and cold weather have created a larger than usual influx of families to shelters in Los Angeles County this year, according to shelter officials and other service providers.

On Wednesday, officials at the Union Rescue Mission, which runs the county's cold-weather shelters, held an emergency meeting to figure out what to do when they run out of hotel vouchers for families, which could happen this month. The numbers, said Chief Executive Andy Bales, are sobering: The region's winter shelters and the skid row mission have seen 86 families in the last three weeks.

Jaira Galicia plays at the feet of her mother, Carmelita Robertson, who was a hotel housekeeper. They are staying at the Union Rescue Mission in downtown Los Angeles. (Photo: Barbara Davidson / Los Angeles Times) December 15, 2008



By comparison, last year the agency took in 20 families at its emergency shelters over the entire cold weather season from Dec. 1 to March 15, with 15 to 20 more at its downtown mission. Two weeks ago, the mission downtown opened up its fifth floor to two-parent families and single fathers with children, something it has never had to do before. It may also convert its chapel to sleeping quarters.

"This is, as far as I am concerned, a disaster of Katrina-esque proportions," said Tanya Tull, chief executive of the nonprofit Beyond Shelter. A variety of negative economic forces are contributing, she said, from job losses to an uptick in foreclosures.

The signs, Tull said, are everywhere: from the father who pretends to work through the night at a computer at a 24-hour office supply center so his child can sleep safe and warm in a stroller to the mother who takes a baby to the emergency room at 11 p.m., knowing the odds are they won't be called until morning and can pass the night in the waiting room.

Even in good times, Los Angeles County -- the most populous in the nation -- has more homeless people than any other metropolitan region in the country. According to a count taken almost two years ago, before the recession began, there were 73,000 people without homes on any given night.

Officials at the county Homeless Services Authority estimate that nearly a quarter of the homeless are parents and their children.

The first choice for many families is a motel room. Government and social services agencies routinely provide families with room vouchers -- but those are growing scarce this year, according to Bales and others.

Carmelita Robertson, for example, lived in a motel room for weeks with her 2-year-old daughter, Jaira. But after she ran out of vouchers, she wound up sharing a room with three other single mothers on the fourth floor of the Union Rescue Mission.

She said she was grateful for being able to move up from an open cot to a private, tented one this week, where she and her daughter have a little privacy at night.

On a recent night, as Jaira scrambled across her cot holding a snow globe that played Christmas carols, Robertson described her descent into homelessness. She said she was working as a housekeeper at a Long Beach hotel and making the rent on a studio apartment -- but because of the economy, her hours kept getting cut.

Last spring, she moved to Virginia to save money by staying with her mother, but they clashed and she came back to Los Angeles in July. She couldn't find work, and wound up on the street.

She's been at the mission since late November. She takes buses across town each day, putting her daughter in day care in South Los Angeles, then heading north for classes to become a medical technician, then reversing her route back to the mission.

Having her daughter with her, she said, keeps her focused on improving her situation.

"Even though we are homeless, we have to stabilize. Keep clothes. Keep diapers. When you have kids, you have to. . . . That's what keeps most women down here pushing, the fact that we have children."

The mothers also help one another. Many have cellphones, and they exchange numbers and call one another when they find out about free toys, diapers or other opportunities.

Copeland, a shelter occupant who is 22 and pregnant with her third child, offered more thoughts on how to survive the street.

Make sure you have some kind of activity every day, she said. If you have to go to the pediatrician, a social services center or the housing office, don't do it all in one day -- instead, stretch it out over three, leaving fewer empty days.

And no matter what, make sure your cellphone is charged so people can reach you with good tips on food or clothes or just a diverting piece of gossip.

Richardson nodded. She has been homeless since July, when she was five months' pregnant. She had been living with her son's father in an apartment in South Los Angeles, but he went to jail, leaving her without a way to pay the rent.

Her son was born while she was homeless, she said, and she is glad he is too young to understand what is happening.

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# ARCHITECT ONLINE



Peter Samuelson wanted to help get the homeless in Los Angeles a roof, but the costs of building shelters were too much and a stationary building couldn't reach very far. Instead, the filmmaker/philanthropist teamed up with Art Center College of Pasadena, Calif., to run a competition to design a mobile, single-person shelter. The result, designed by Eric Lindeman and Jason Zasa, is a shopping-cart-turned-camper—the EDAR, short for Everyone Deserves a Roof. During the day the cart has space to hold cans and bottles and can be moved around a city, but at night it folds out into a sleeping platform and is covered by a canvas cover complete with windows. See the full story from the L.A. Times: [Upgrading from a cardboard box for the homeless - Los Angeles Times](#).