

What I Do at AACH

(Arlington-Alexandria Coalition for the Homeless)

by Carol Mournighan



TODAY, MY DAY started at 10:30 am. I am here with another Ignatian Volunteer, Mary Campbell, and for the most part, we have different roles with the clients. This morning I pick up a client and her son to take them to Infinite Technologies so her son could be measured for a cap to correct plagiocephaly (misshapen head). After we came back I meet with two new clients, both single and pregnant. We talk about their needs and what makes a good pre-natal diet.

Now I am on the front desk, buzzing open the door (this is a safe house) and answering the phone. While I'm at the desk I get the chance to speak with clients as they pass by. I am also doing research on bus routes and working on a presentation on "the plate," the new dietary guidelines tool developed by the USDA.

On Wednesdays, I facilitate the women's group. All the women in the shelter are invited to come and ask questions, share their problems and concerns. Here they offer each other help for it is never easy to live in a homeless shelter. I have learned so much from these women and some of them are on my most admired list.

I also escort clients to their doctors to facilitate communication between the client, whose English language skills often prevent the medical team from fully comprehending their condition, and

their doctors. I will often convey that information to the staff here at AACH so they may better help the client. I have asked my family dentist to care for our clients' dental needs for free and he has graciously agreed. He will see any client and do any procedure as long as he can do it in his office. Sometimes I drive the clients there if they don't have a car or are not familiar with the bus routes.

I have begun my fourth year at AACH this fall. I have enjoyed my placement and look forward to another year (at least) here. AACH is a second degree homeless shelter which means that we provide more than just room and board. Our cliental varies some single women, some families. Some are refugees, others immigrants, some are battered wives and others are here because they have lost everything. The one thing they all have in common is they are homeless and need our help. We also have social workers who help our clients in ways too numerous to count.

The staff here does not call Mary and me volunteers, rather they call us the unpaid staff. They ask our advice and listen to our suggestions. They even make us laugh.

I feel fortunate to be able to be here. I have learned so much but I am also able to see the face of Christ in my clients. My best gift was given to me by a client who was leaving. She gave me a big hug and told me she loved me. I have been blessed.