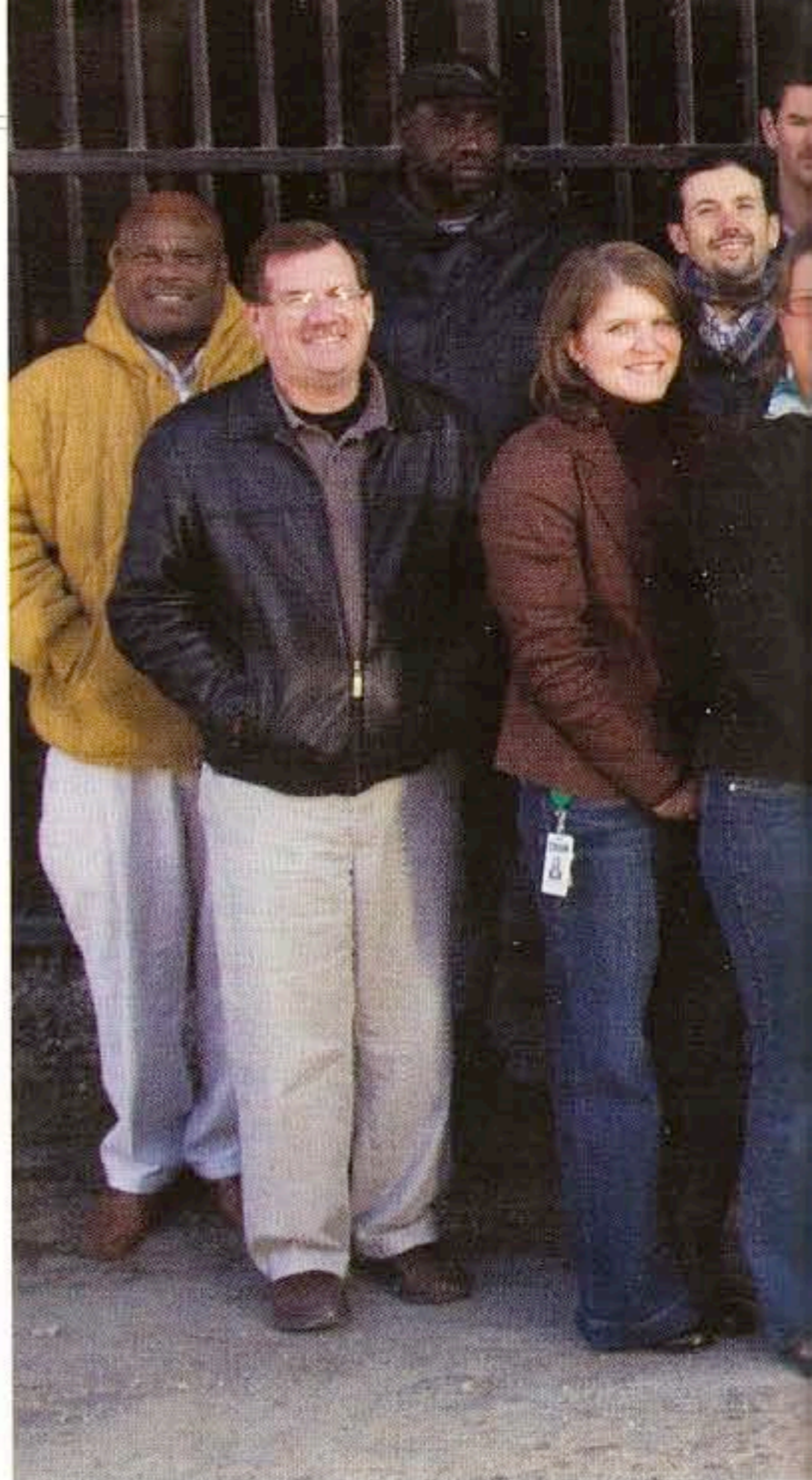


# In from the COLO

**FOR YEARS, KNOXVILLE'S HOMELESS** were resigned to living without a home. They settled for a daily, paranoid journey filled with fear of potential theft or assault. And while some certainly may have chosen their path, many in the population are left helpless due to mental and physical illness. For those, chronically homeless, there is only one answer to their problems...shelter. And thanks to Knoxville and Knox County's Ten Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness (TYP), they are beginning to find it.

**By J. Brandon Lowe**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JUSTIN FEE,  
SHAWN POYNTER & DEMETRIC BANAHENE



## HOUSING FIRST

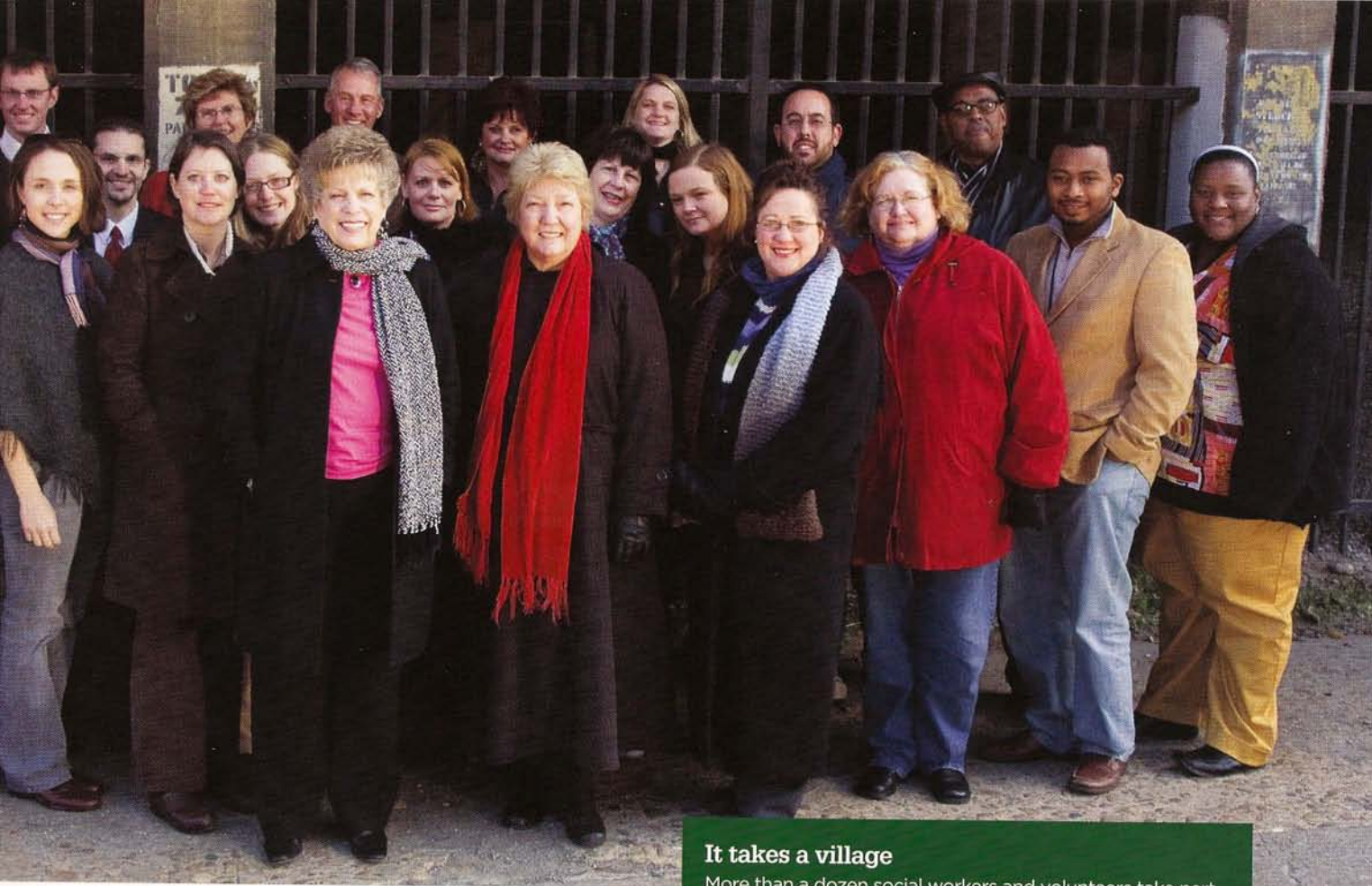
DR. ROGER NOOE, THE RETIRED University of Tennessee professor and originator of Knoxville's TYP, tells a story from the early 1990s, when then Vice President Al Gore and his wife Tipper came to work with Whittle Communications on an advertisement that would put the Vice Presidential couple on camera with someone who had pulled themselves out of homelessness in Knoxville.

"We had trouble finding anyone," Nooe recalls. "There just weren't many success stories then."

By that point in the history of the modern homeless plight, a series of factors, most important of which was the collapse of the mental health system, had trapped mentally and disabled individuals on the streets.

That's when jails began to house the mentally ill and the reactive response nationwide became to "manage" the homeless problem through shelters, soup kitchens and indirectly through loose public sidewalk ordinances. In turn, cities around the country, including Knoxville, have seen homeless numbers soar. It has been estimated that on a given night in Knoxville, between 800 and 1000 people are homeless.

And while numbers have grown since the Gore-visit, a national shift in thinking about the homeless epidemic from a management approach to a



problem solving approach has also emerged. And it has permanently changed the way we think of homelessness in Knoxville.

## THE NEW TREND

THE NEW TREND, LED BY THE UNITED STATES Interagency Council on Homelessness and its Executive Director, Philip F. Mangano, puts the focus on the chronically homeless, which technically are the mentally and physically disabled who have been homeless for over one year or who have experienced four or more periods of homelessness within the last three years. Or, to put it bluntly, the worst of the worst.

The reason for the narrow focus is that the average chronically homeless individual uses an estimated \$44,000 annually in public services in Knoxville, often bouncing between jails and hospitals. Nooe conducted a study in 2006 on the history of homelessness in Knoxville and found that a sample set of 25 homeless individuals in Knoxville used nearly \$1 million of taxpayers' money in 2006 through jail, detox and hospitalization expenses.

"If you follow these individuals, it's almost like a pinball ricocheting around a pinball machine," says Jon Lawler, current Director of the TYP.

In accordance, the TYP calls for wrap-around support from a variety of agencies to help get this section of the homeless population into "permanent supportive housing."

"Housing is the stabilizing force," says Bruce Spangler, who works as an alcohol and drug counselor for Volunteer Ministry Center, the organization that provides case management for those individuals who have been placed into permanent supportive housing. While it seems counter-intuitive that the organiza-

## It takes a village

More than a dozen social workers and volunteers take part in giving hope back to a single homeless individual in Knoxville. From volunteer mentors to professional case managers, teams of people are dedicated to making the goals of the city's Ten-Year Plan a reality. Pictured above are a small number of the many professionals who find ways to lift up the homeless on a daily basis.

tion's focus on the most vulnerable would lead to an unmanageable, dysfunctional scenario, the approach has helped keep a large majority of people in housing. Since January 2007, VMC has placed 128 chronics into homes, with a success rate of 74% in 2007 and 94% in 2008.

"We had a learning curve," says Ginny Weatherstone, VMC's Executive Director since 1996. "But we are well within the national average, and we are still learning."

Weatherstone leads a team of five case managers who handle an average of 20 clients per day. "Once somebody moves in, they have a friend. That friend makes sure they get to doctors' appointments. They take them to the grocery store. They help them find the kinds of activities that make life worth living," she says.

The day-to-day experiences of caseworkers demonstrate the importance of putting housing first. They are seeing fewer police officers and ambulances; repeat offenders are showing up on their doorstep less.

"A lot of people we deal with have small criminal issues is directly related to their homelessness," said Case Manager Gabrielle Cline. "If they had housing, they wouldn't have a criminal record."

One such client, whom we will call Peter, represents the essence of the housing first model.

Peter was very recognizable downtown. After over 40 years of being homeless, he had been beaten countless times and arrested over

300 times, mostly for public intoxication. A chronic inebriate, he used to get robbed a lot. At 60, the story of his life had been one of scavenging, panhandling and drinking mouthwash. Eventually, in 2007, he wound up with serious lacerations on his face after a beating he took from thieves who pummeled him with a brick. That experience eventually led, thanks to the intervention of a VMC case manager, to Peter moving into his own apartment in August 2007.

Today, Peter has been reintegrated into society thanks to a series of accountability measures, not the least of which is a weekly meeting with his case manager. Forty years ago, someone like Peter would have likely wound up in an insane asylum.

As a poster child for permanent supportive housing, people like Peter have helped to mold a shift in thinking amongst other homeless. VMC has been swarmed with people like Peter who are interested in the TYP's permanent supportive housing. That swarm puts a dagger in the cliché that the homeless don't want help. The fact is, they do want help, but they are the ones least capable.

Peter's success highlights a fundamental leap forward offered by the TYP plan and others like it around the country. The network of services the TYP plan creates is meant to provide more than a roof. It also provides reintegration.

To facilitate and sustain that reintegration, faith-based organizations have emerged as a key role player. The Compassion Coalition, a Christian non-profit organization that helps pool the resources of the faith-based community, has created mentoring teams called "Support Circles," which are made up of no more than 5 people who meet with permanent supportive housing residents weekly.

"This isn't a project for your church to go and fix something," says Compassion Coalition Faith-Based Mentoring Coordinator, Jessica Bocangel. "We are asking you to walk alongside somebody that might be hard to walk alongside."

Employment services for the homeless have also emerged and are particularly encouraging for skeptics of permanent supportive housing.



### Meet Karl Martin

After years of living on the streets, Karl moved into his new apartment the week of November 3. A true beneficiary of the TYP, he now enjoys a full-time job and is working hard to rebuild his life. In less than two months, he's already saved more than \$2,000, which will go towards improving his new home and giving back to his community.



### ▲ Frank Rothermel and Mary Hawk

Frank chairs the Advisory Council of the Ten-Year Plan and Mary is a case manager with Volunteer Ministry Center.



### ◀ Ray Abbas and Jessica Bocangel

Ray is with Salvation Army as Employment Coordinator and Jessica is the Mentoring Program Coordinator, Compassion Coalition.

Ray Abbas has worked with the Knoxville Salvation Army as Employment Coordinator since the beginning of October. His job is to look for ways to connect willing and open-minded business owners with the homeless looking for work.

"Getting the business community on board is the biggest challenge," Abbas says, "but I think employment is vital. Without that earned income, it makes remaining in your housing impossible. Plus, employment restores self-confidence."

Knoxville City Councilman Chris Woodhull concurs and sees growth in employment opportunities for the homeless as inevitable, especially in the growing downtown district.

"I think you are going to find lots of entrepreneurs using the labor and skills of people on the street," Woodhull says. "If there are companies that are relocating downtown, they are going to offer jobs to whoever wants to work."

## BUMPS IN THE ROAD

RIGHT NOW, however, those future employees remain, for many, an eyesore that is hindering development in the downtown district.

And VMC's controversial \$6 million Minvilla Manor project, which seeks to turn the former Fifth Avenue Motel on Broadway



**Sissy Flack and ▲  
Pete Ferri**

Both are case managers at CAC who are working on homeless prevention with at-risk KCDC residents.

**Rev. Dr. Bruce ►  
Spangler  
and Ginny  
Weatherstone**

Bruce is the Chief Operating Officer of Volunteer Ministry Center that is led by Ginny, Chief Executive Officer



into an apartment building with 57 units of permanent supportive housing, has further fueled the notion that the city is investing in some sort of homeless district. That fear has not only stalled the push for more permanent supportive housing, but also highlighted a central concern about the potentially negative, indirect affects of the "housing first" approach.

Another ember in that fire has been the backlash against the transformation of a vacant 16-unit apartment building on South Knoxville's Baker Avenue, which has been tapped as a permanent supportive housing site. An uproar from residents of the neighborhood ensued due in large part to the location's proximity to a series of apartment complexes known for drug dealings.

Beyond practical and understandable concerns, neighborhood groups that oppose the project have called for more civic discourse about the site selection process for permanent supportive housing.

"People on Old Sevier aren't without compassion," said Whitney Stanley, one of a number of concerned South Knoxville residents who believe their input should have been sought first. "We believe permanent housing has to be addressed, but it needs to be done responsibly."

The folks at the TYP agree.

"The process of identifying these sites was not inclusive enough," Lawler says. "That's why we have decided to involve all the important decision-makers on the front end so that we can

reach compromises."

Lawler and his team have already been meeting city council and county commissioners and have plans for a workshop on December 11th between the TYP and the two groups to discuss the future involvement of council and commission members in the site selection process.

"A for-profit mentality comes with having a measuring stick," says Lawler, who was chosen for his background as a developer of low-income housing. "We are realizing that we need to continue to be results-oriented, but we need to continue to reach out and involve the community."

Lawler and his team, Robert Finley and Mike Dunthorn, have also begun to enlist the services of Knoxville-based public relations firm Moxley Carmichael, demonstrating the TYP's increasing focus on garnering public support for the plan.

But while recent tension over site selection is leading to a call for further pursuit of public buy-in, a more fundamental challenge faces the TYP: a severe lack of funding.

In the summer of 2008, Knox County decreased its pledged support from \$100,000 to \$50,000, making the TYP one of a handful of budget cut casualties for the county. Public funding covers staff salaries and office expenses.

There is currently no federal, state or local funding for the TYP. The program has been supported through private funding up until this point. However, in June 2009, the city and county are scheduled to take over funding.

"The city and the county are going to have to step up and figure out how they are going to fund this," Lawler says. "We really need some dedicated revenue sources. And in at a time where revenues are restrained, that is a big challenge."

The city has said that it will likely have to make up the difference, but funding for the actual implementation of the plan is still a big concern for Lawler. He has estimated that supportive services such as VMC's case managers could cost \$1.4 million in 2009.



**Meet Kenneth and Melissa Passmore**

One year after receiving their housing voucher from Volunteer Ministry Center, the Passmores have been able to put their lives back on track. After years of living out of their car and in shelters, they now have a new home, pictured above. The couple praises the Housing First program for putting hope and stability back in their lives.

AS WE APPROACH the midway point on the TYP, what does 2015 hold? Now, more than ever, it seems as though there is a need to respond with an intangible. And that intangible seems to be building public support. The public needs to be courted and cultivated. Otherwise, future plans to add supportive housing, the TYP's most fundamental need at this point, will be splintered by a growing belief that the TYP plan is seeking out already impoverished neighborhoods for that housing, and worse, that the plan is just another waste of the taxpayer's dollars.

The reality is, this just isn't true. While simple logic doesn't always solve problems, in this case, it creates solutions. The idea that you can put a dent in homelessness by simply putting people into housing, at first glance, seems dangerously naïve. And yet, it turns out to be an elegant solution.

Getting to specifics, on the other hand, is a bit more complicated. Bringing together a cross section of the city's private agencies, each with their own customized role to meet one common goal is an accomplishment that must not go unnoticed.

But there are two important hurdles that must be addressed: funding and public will. And make no mistake...they are intertwined.

Like many movements in Knoxville, the TYP is another great idea that has been met with unbridled skepticism and anxiety, often with good reason, and sometimes with a cynicism for government programs you can only find in "these here parts."

An endless array of data shows that permanent supportive housing works. Even better, Knoxville's chronically homeless are moving into housing and staying there.

If Vice-President elect Joe Biden and his wife, Jill, were to come to work with Scripps Networks locally on a broadcast similar to the one the Gores tried nearly 20 years ago, they would have hundreds of formerly homeless to choose from.

Imagine that possibility...Knoxville's progress at reducing homelessness actually being used as a boon for the city.

Dr. Nooe, who has given over 300 presentations on the topic trying to convince Knoxville housing first works, believes the day could be coming soon. That's why he encourages all who are involved in the TYP to keep a record of what they are doing.

"We can be a model for cities our size," Nooe says. "Lots of people come up with plans that are well received in cities, and then they go on a shelf somewhere. I suspect there comes a point where we don't all agree on everything. But we have a plan, and it is working." ❖

## GIVE BACK

# Volunteer

There is a big difference between knowing about the solution and being part of the solution. Donating is a great first step, but true wealth is time. Here are a handful of organizations solving Knoxville's homeless crisis that offer opportunities to get involved.

## Volunteer Ministry Center

### ❖ The Mission

To restore dignity and productivity to the lives of the homeless, mentally ill and working poor by providing programs that help them achieve their highest level of self-sufficiency.

### ❖ Get Involved

VMC was founded in 1987 by volunteers from Knoxville area churches. Today it continues to rely heavily on the contributions of others. The two biggest volunteer needs are crisis counselors in the Refuge program—aimed at helping the poor avoid homelessness with counseling, housing assistance and transportation—and group organizations for serving meals. Refuge volunteers help thousands stay off the streets every year.

### ❖ Contact

Alyssa Miracle  
Volunteer Coordinator  
865.524.3926

## Salvation Army of Knoxville

### ❖ The Mission

To preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in His name without discrimination.

### ❖ Get Involved

Known as "the Army behind the Army," Salvation Army Volunteers have a wide variety of holiday and everyday opportunities. Everyday opportunities include kitchen dishwashers and servers, food pantry organizers, stock managers at SA family stores, and warehouse labor and organizers for the Salvation Army Warehouse. This Christmas, join the Red Kettle Campaign and be a bell-ringer at one of over 50 locations throughout the city.

### ❖ Contact

Yvonne Yates  
Volunteer Coordinator  
865.971.4907

## Helen Ross McNabb Center

### ❖ The Mission

To improve the life of the people we serve.

### ❖ Get Involved

Volunteers help the Helen Ross McNabb Center continue to interact with the community from serving on boards and committees to helping with special events and program support. After training, volunteers are ready to serve in a number of programs including Therapeutic Preschool, Healthy Families, Gateway and Friendship House. This Christmas, be sure to volunteer for HRM's Christmas for the Children Program, providing holiday gifts for underprivileged children in the community.

### ❖ Contact

Vicki Catapano  
Volunteer Coordinator  
865.329.3238

## Knox Area Rescue Ministries

### ❖ The Mission

To stand firm, strive together, and effectively serve the poor and needy of the Knoxville area in Jesus' name.

### ❖ Get Involved

Get started by taking part in KARM Encounter: an hour-and-a-half introduction session to the ministry's facilities, programs and mission. After training, volunteers can serve meals or join one of six ministry teams: Carpenter's Hands (facility repairs), Check In (counseling and bed-making), Bread of Life (lunch-time mentoring), Burt Mart (store management), Thrift Stores (fashion & organizing), and Volunteer Relations (growing the volunteer force).

### ❖ Contact

Victoria Reagan  
Volunteer Coordinator  
865.673.6540