

Social workers clear camp for homeless



PHOTOS BY DANNY BOURQUE / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

A social worker with UNITY of Greater New Orleans talks to a homeless man early Thursday underneath the Claiborne Avenue overpass near Canal Street, where about 200 lived in a chaotic concrete encampment.

Secretive effort assessed, moved its occupants

By Katy Reckdahl
Staff writer

Early Thursday, social workers from UNITY of Greater New Orleans cleared a homeless camp that provoked the ire of city officials and attracted do-gooders from across the nation.

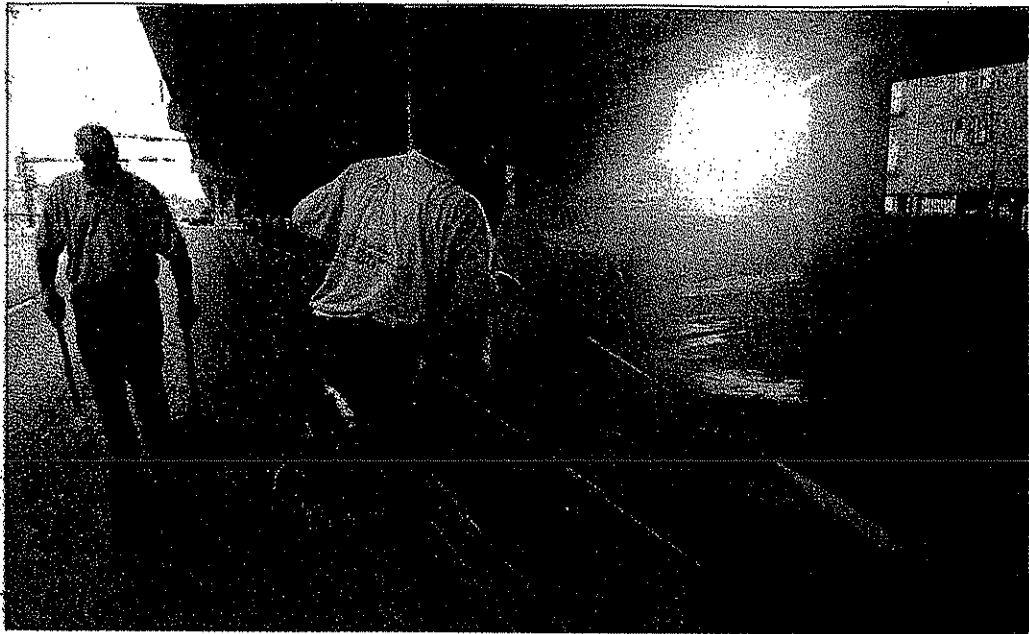
UNITY caseworkers had spent the past months gradually removing severely disabled people from the camp, underneath the Claiborne Avenue overpass near Canal Street.

A steady stream of vans shuttled the last people up Claiborne Avenue to the Salvation Army's Uptown shelter, where



Mayor Ray Nagin called the Claiborne camp 'a mess' in January and vowed to clean it up by the end of February. But one of the difficulties of emptying the settlement with any haste was the level of physical and mental illness there.

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At sunrise Thursday, two garbage trucks and pressure washers from the Downtown Development District eliminated the last evidence of life on a concrete slab underneath the Claiborne Avenue overpass.

Nagin called the camp 'a mess' back in January

HOMELESS, from A-1

caseworkers formally interviewed them and assessed their needs. Those without disabilities will receive three months of rental assistance, in order to help them get back on their feet, he said. Severely disabled people likely will be eligible for more long-term rental assistance and services.

By Thursday at 7:30 a.m., the caseworkers had transported the 38 remaining people, most of them able-bodied and capable of working, said Mike Miller, an outreach worker who'd spent countless hours under the bridge cataloging medical, substance-abuse and mental-health histories of the tent city's residents.



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Wilbert Richardson drags a cot and other items to be thrown away early Thursday. Many who pitched tents under the overpass came from abandoned houses and other smaller camps across the city, said UNITY Director Martha Kegel.

Chaotic place

At sunrise, two rumbling garbage trucks and pressure washers from the Downtown Development District eliminated the last evidence of life on this concrete slab. The quiet endpoint contrasted starkly with the crowded, fetid encampment of a few months ago, when a rotating group of about 200 lived amid raggedy tents, scattered mattresses and rat-infested couches. The camp ballooned at the start of the year, after state and city officials closed down a similar camp at nearby Duncan Plaza just after Christmas, saying they needed to clear the way to demolish a state office building that today remains standing. UNITY staff, working around the clock to house the 250 or so people they'd removed from Duncan Plaza, had neither the budget or the manpower to immediately help those who came in large numbers to the Claiborne bridge, UNITY Director Martha Kegel said.

Many who pitched tents under the overpass came from abandoned houses and other smaller camps across the city, Kegel said. By and large, most have said they were drawn to the noisy site by the steady meals and donations delivered by church folks, sorority girls and schoolchildren.

Still, from the start, the concrete settlement was more chaotic than the grassy camp a few blocks away at Duncan Plaza, across from City Hall. There, an ad hoc leadership group called "Homeless Pride" largely kept a lid on public drug sales and tried to encourage quiet after dark. But the Claiborne camp at some points was overtaken by dealers running an open-air crack-cocaine market.

For months, city officials fretted about the area.

In late January, Nagin called the scene "a mess," after he'd driven by and seen a man "drinking beer and just flipping the bird to citizens." He announced that the city would take action by the end of February. The next week, he accepted the New Orleans Mission's proposal to move the colony to a 140-bunk Quonset-hut-style tent behind the shelter, purchased by the city for \$100,000.

Further announcements about the project included a \$186,000 remodeled dayroom at the shelter and \$48,000 worth of sprinklers and fire alarms, also financed by the city.

The Mission's tent is now filled with homeless men every night, Gonzales said. But the mayor's plan to empty the Claiborne camp never moved forward.

And the Mission's storm-torn building isn't yet up to fire code, as a state fire marshal made clear Monday, when he demanded that the shelter completely shutter its second floor — including the dayroom — after discovering two men napping there. The fire marshal had prohibited anyone from sleeping on that floor, Gonzales said, because it still lacks half of the required sprinklers and fire alarms.

Serious illness

One of the difficulties of emptying the Claiborne camp with any haste was the level of illness there. Most of its residents suffered from untreated mental illness and life-threatening medical conditions, according to detailed surveys conducted by Miller and others. That same survey found that 86 percent of those living at the camp were from the New Orleans area, a statistic that surprised many and flew in the face of Nagin's

May tongue-in-cheek comment about solving the homeless problem with one-way bus tickets out of town.

Many of the frailest people interviewed under the overpass said they had lived with family before Hurricane Katrina, often a mother or sister. Many times, those family members were now dead or displaced, leaving them solo for the first time in their lives.

Typical of the Claiborne camp was Warren Mays, 63, a small, toothless New Orleans native who arrived at the camp for the first time last night, Miller said. Mays has slept on porches and sidewalks around town for years, and his health has now worsened to the point where he carries a bag of prescription pills for everything from built-up fluid to mental illness, he said.

When Miller woke Mays on Thursday morning, saying "Good morning — it's that time," white-adhesive hospital monitors dotted Mays' bare chest. On his wrists, four yellow bracelets documented a series of recent hospital visits: on July 6, 8, 14 and 16.

As he got up, he looped his left arm around a crutch to prop him up as he walks, because he has shortness of breath, he said. In his right hand, he carried a yellowish plastic bag connected to a catheter, inserted earlier this week, he said.

'Should be on the list'

UNITY receives countless pleas for housing, some from people living in deep poverty but not actually homeless, Miller said. Thursday's mission was deliberately kept secret and began at 5:30 a.m. to avoid a last-minute rush on the camp by people seeking help with rent.

On Thursday, just after the

last van drove off, a slender young woman ran up, saying that she too had slept under the bridge.

"I've been out here — I should be on the list for an apartment," she said.

Miller handed her his card. In his months talking with people under the bridge, he'd never seen her before, he said.

He pointed across Claiborne Avenue, beyond the man in rubber boots hosing off the concrete. There, two more people ran toward him, bags in hand. "It's going to be happening all day," Miller said.

He knows, from interviews with roughly 1,000 of the people who have rotated through the

Claiborne and Duncan Plaza camps within the past several months, that UNITY is the last safety net — for people who lose family, get too old for the foster-care system or are released by hospitals, jails and mental-health facilities, Miller said.

"We play cleanup for the whole broken system," he said.

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