You Can’t Go Home Again

January 1, 2001 By Craig Willse

Day 1: “Some information about what’s going on?” I thrust a flier toward two guys, but they don’t flinch. I spin on my heels to catch a pedestrian coming from the other direction. “Some information -- ”

New York City street corners are dotted with flier guys, and now that I’m doing it, I curse myself for every fast-food menu and topless-girl ad I’ve been offered and declined. I reap what I sow.

“Some information about what’s going on inside?” The woman glances at me, then at the welfare center, where three uniformed guards lean, watching our crew intently. She takes a flier and hurries on.

Day 11: It is October, and we are in our second week of the DASIS Watch. DASIS, the Division of AIDS Services and Income Support, is the branch of welfare in New York City that provides food stamps, emergency housing and support services for HIVers. For some still-unexplained reason, caseworkers have been refusing to provide the same-day housing that Local Law 49 guarantees.

I’m one of the New York City AIDS Housing Network advocates staking out the DASIS centers. We verify the reservations and offer subway fare so people can get to their placement without being busted for jumping the turnstiles. It’s hard to get to the bottom of this new crisis, but it’s hardly surprising in a city that houses homeless people in jail. But reason or no, the cold months are coming and people need shelter.

Day 17: After a few calm evenings, tonight is chaos. At 9:30 p.m., a full hour-and-a-half after the deadline by which clients must check into rooms or forfeit them, seven people are still inside the DASIS office, homeless. I stand outside with a client who’s decided to spend the night riding the subway cars rather than wait any more. (He’s been here since morning.) Yesterday he was placed at a hotel in Queens, a mile from the nearest subway stop. The few hours’ rest indoors didn’t seem worth it, only to start the process again in the morning. A fellow advocate gives him some cash for food and the train. He leaves, exhausted, visibly sick.

Next I speak with a homeless couple. The man has a hotel reservation, but caseworkers refused to house his girlfriend. The pair sit together on the sidewalk and cry. They, too, spend the night on the trains.

At midnight I leave, accompanying two other clients to a hotel on West 93rd Street to make sure they get in. The desk clerk is ready for us and there is no problem. They have placements for one

night, not the 28 days DASIS used to give, and they will be back in the morning. Later, safe and comfortable in my apartment, I sob on my roommate’s shoulder. Nothing we do is enough.

Day 20: I arrive at 6 p.m., loaded with peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches. The mood is light, almost everyone is housed, and only a few remain inside. By now, we all know one another, and the clients ask for us by hair color -- “the blond one helps me.” The waits are getting shorter. A client tells a funny story about being a kid and getting in trouble for sneaking an extra piece of carrot cake. The story has nothing whatsoever to do with the bleak reality that brings us all together, and for this I am glad.

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