

Helping the desperate not always a clear path

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He slept in a chair, for the better part of three years.

Not a big comfy recliner, but a hard plastic thing. He would put a bandana over his eyes, pull his hood way down and lay his head on a table, cradled in his own arms. Night after night, in a corner of the Ottawa Mission lounge, Steven Maharag quietly defied comprehension.

From the start of 2009, the Mission recorded 821 overnight stays — none in the usual dorms where emergency housing is provided; once in a while on a mat in the chapel.

They knew he was mentally ill, but Steven was a riddle. Unusually quiet, he was polite and responsive to questions. His hygiene was good, his clothes were clean, he took his meals, he was never violent or in trouble. He had no addiction problem.

But there was something unreachable about him. What, and why?

On Dec. 6, he was found dead on the sidewalk below the Laurier Avenue Bridge. He had jumped, apparently, and was spotted lying there just after 4:30 a.m. He was 36.

It is now just over a month later. Ottawa police have still not reached any next-of-kin, as though the man disappeared within himself, erasing his own history.

The Mission held a memorial service for Steven on Monday. It was sad, of course, but for more than the usual reasons: losing him was hard on staff; not knowing him was perhaps harder.

Chaplain Tom Donohue talked about the kinds of questions staff were asking themselves.

“Did we do all we could? Did we do our best? Was there something we could have done?”

The dilemma, the chaplain explained, is an old one, especially on the streets. How to respect the privacy of individuals, their own decision-making, yet fulfil the Mission’s responsibility to provide safe haven, help for the desperate?

It also points to an obvious weakness in the city’s emergency-shelter system, as echoed by executive director Diane Morrison. There has to be a better way, she said, than letting a man spend 800 days in a shelter, sleeping on a chair, without a plan for recovery.

Indeed. Over the course of 15 years, the Mission has gone from temporary housing for 85 men to nightly providing emergency shelter to 250, with a raft of new social programs on the side.

Staff say the Mission is visited twice a week by a psychiatric outreach team from the Royal Ottawa. (It dealt with some 460 clients last year.) Workers had spoken to Steven on many occasions, they say, but he would never really “engage” in a discussion about possible treatment.

Helping agencies are in a tricky position. It is possible to commit a person for psychiatric assessment against his will, but only if there is an imminent danger to self or anyone else or obvious incompetence. Even then, a doctor, a justice of the peace or the police must be brought into the picture and due process followed.

Sgt. Mike Lamothe is head of the mental health unit at the Ottawa police, which has four full-time officers. In 2010, the police had almost 5,300 calls for service related to a mental-health issue. Of those, about 550 involved legally-enforceable orders for assessment.

“It’s very hard to intervene with street people because they often don’t want to engage,” said Sgt. Lamothe, for two main reasons: a possible mental illness combined with the effects of addiction.

In Steven’s case, Mission staff said he was not “form-able,” a reference to the legal form used to send clients for mandatory assessment and treatment.

His situation was all the more mysterious because there was no family member, no good friend, to advocate for him. “We were his family,” said Mission senior manager Simon Brazier.

At the service, a friend said Steven loved sweets, like chocolate and ice cream. He had virtually no possessions, carrying what he owned in a messenger-boy bag, held by a strap slung across his chest. He carried baby powder inside, for his feet, and kept his coins stacked in an empty pill bottle, the kind with a screw-top lid.

He had a routine. He would walk during the day, often to the area of the Laurier Avenue Bridge, a spot he said “helped clear his mind.” He would spend hours at the Mission, pacing, sometimes having quiet moments in the chapel.

On the last night of his life, he watched a movie there. He was captured on surveillance camera leaving the Waller Street premises about 11 p.m.

And not long after, he was gone. It will surprise no one to know that, yes, there are other Stevens on the streets of Ottawa, counted in dozens, not ones and twos.

Anyone with information about Steven Maharag’s next-of-kin is asked to call Ottawa police, 236-0311, ext. 5166.