



# GMC NEWS

The Newsletter of the Georgetown Ministry Center



## A Bridge to Better Solutions

Early next month, DC will perform a cleanup under the bridges and overpasses of the Whitehurst Freeway, as they have done many times before. Recently, signs went up warning the people who sleep there that anything found in the area will be thrown away.

Unfortunately, the people who occupy these encampments have nowhere else to go. When they are evicted, they move on to the next neighborhood and displace a group there. Within months, a new group will move into the space under the Whitehurst Freeway. At first, it will be one or two people who can successfully live under the radar, but the colony will grow, and the cycle will repeat itself.

This cycle will continue, all over the city, until someone says we have to do something differently. A better response would be to address the primary needs of the interlopers and move them into safe and appropriate housing. If instead of demanding police action residents demanded services for these people, we might be able to stop the cycle. However, some residents in the buildings surrounding these campsites can't see beyond the immediate disorderly encampments. "Where they go is not my problem," we often hear.

You can't arrest someone for being homeless. You can't arrest someone for being mentally ill. You can't even require them to get treatment. It has all been tested in the courts. People who are homeless and mentally ill have rights. The police understand that. Lawyers understand it. But it is hard for a homeowner to understand.

I have heard the complaints. I know the frustration. But if people used their energy to demand more appropriate resources--like treatment and housing--for people who are homeless, we could empty the encampments all over the City and end this cycle. We can decide to be a society that takes care of the dysfunctional people in our community, or we can decide to be a dysfunctional society that allows people to live under bridges in huge disordered encampments.

Lets talk. I'm around. Give me a call.

—*Gunther Stern*

## Trying to Change the System

I joined Georgetown Ministry Center's Board of Directors representing the Treatment Advocacy Center. While the work of the Georgetown Ministry Center and the Treatment Advocacy Center is different in so many ways, we have a common mission of getting treatment to those who are most in need.

We know that many people who are homeless have severe mental illness and struggle with anosognosia, a brain condition that afflicts 50% of individuals with schizophrenia and 40% of individuals with severe bipolar disorder. People with anosognosia are unable to recognize their own illness, no matter how painfully obvious it may be to everyone around them. As a result, many of the homeless with severe and persistent psychiatric problems will not access help voluntarily within the existing systems of care.

We tend to think of mental illness strictly as a behavioral problem, but mental illness is a disease of the brain, and without treatment the brain deteriorates in ways that can never be recovered.

D.C.'s laws make it difficult to intervene when someone is living under a bridge unless they are at the point where they are found to be "likely to injure" themselves or others." As a result, individuals are rarely involuntarily admitted to a hospital on grounds other than imminent risk of violence to others or suicide.

What this means in practice is that individuals are allowed to deteriorate without care until they're violent or harmful to themselves. If they are admitted, they are often released with inadequate aftercare and soon relapse.

The Treatment Advocacy Center has been working to improve the system so that people can receive treatment before it is too late. We are also fighting to change the mindset about homelessness and mental illness. However, until the system changes to help those falling through the cracks of our mental health system, Georgetown Ministry Center is a safe haven for those living on the streets with severe mental illness.

—*Kathryn Cohen,*  
*Board Member & Attorney at the Treatment Advocacy Center*



## HOT Conquers the Cold

This winter, nearly 300 students, faculty, and staff members from Georgetown University saved lives in Georgetown by serving on the Hypothermia Outreach Team (HOT) we started with the University in January 2014.

We trained these volunteers to do street outreach, distribute cold-weather items, and recognize the signs and symptoms of hypothermia. When the temperature dropped below freezing, which it did almost every night in February, a team of four to twelve volunteers went out to make sure those who remained outdoors on the street were safe. Often, they called the Hypothermia Hot Line to make sure the city knew where people were sleeping. Twice this winter, they had to call 911. (See *Hot in Action*, p.2)



HOT passes out socks to a man on K Street - photo by Lauren Ober

All of us at GMC appreciate and admire the commitment from Georgetown University in helping us keep our homeless neighbors safe. The greatest and most obvious impact HOT can have is being able to save a life by calling 911, but our guests also tell us that they appreciate having the team check up on them. It is reassuring to know that someone cares. Often, our guests directed the team to other individuals nearby who might need attention.

The Hypothermia Outreach Team shows the power of community and collaboration with GMC, Georgetown University, and those living on the street all working together to keep our neighbors safe.

The Hypothermia Outreach Team was recently featured on NPR as part of a series on homelessness in the District (WAMU 88.5 Metro Connection: "Homeless residents share what it's like to live outdoors in February"). Listen to the segment if you haven't already. It paints a great picture of the Hypothermia Outreach Team's important work.

Of course, we are also grateful to everyone who donated socks, hats, gloves, scarves, and hand warmers this winter. Thanks for making this winter a little bit warmer!

–Stephanie Chan

## HOT in Action

*Hannah Collins, a freshman at Georgetown University, served as a Hypothermia Outreach Team leader this winter. One night in February, she and her team called 911 and saved a man's life. This is her account of that frigid night and her thoughts on being part of the Hypothermia Outreach Team.*

February 6 was my second time doing hypothermia outreach and my first time leading a team. The first time I did outreach, my team did not see anyone on the street. The second time I did outreach, we had contact with fifteen people over two hours. During those two hours, we made two phone calls on behalf of people we encountered: for one man, we called the Hypothermia Hotline, but for another man we called 911.

Under the overpass near Foggy Bottom and K Street, several people were sleeping or settling in for the night, covering up with clothing and blankets and grateful for the items we offered. However, one man was exposed to the elements and not interacting with anyone else in the vicinity. He was sitting on the ground intoxicated, wearing only one shoe. We began by offering him a scarf, socks, a hat, and an emergency blanket – one of every item we had with us – and he accepted, but it alarmed us that he seemed incoherent and was not taking any measures to protect himself from the cold. We made the call to 911 as we walked a little ways away but remained close enough to see him.

The amount of description and time that go into making a 911 call surprised me, since I have been lucky enough thus far that the only previous emergency calls I'd ever witnessed had been the kind where a child playing with a phone had accidentally dialed 911. While waiting for the ambulance, we stood at the corner of 27th and K Street as we described the man and then described ourselves so that the paramedics could find us. When the ambulance arrived and we directed the paramedics towards the man who needed help, it took an additional several minutes for the two paramedics to convince him to join them. But, by the time we watched the ambulance driving away with this man safely in the back and bound for the hospital, my team felt immense relief that we'd gotten him help.

The experience I had leading the outreach team that night really opened my eyes to the importance of the work that HOT does, and since then I have responded for calls to do outreach feeling prepared, but also knowing that I can never predict exactly what will happen, what we might have to do, and what I might learn during the course of the evening. Doing hypothermia outreach and the kind of impact I can have is drastically different from anything else I have ever experienced before, which might be what I enjoy most about it. I still can't fully believe that I have the opportunity to make that kind of impact.

–Hannah Collins, HOT Leader

## Creating Conversations

“I don’t think that this conversation group is for me,” said a GMC member in response to an invitation to join the “Creative Conversations” group in the center.

He ended up staying for the group, and at the end he said, “This group is cool—you can talk about anything that is important to you. Actually, you should call the group Creating Conversations instead of Creative Conversations. Because that’s what we do. We create the conversation as we go along and in a way that is meaningful to us.”

The group, “Creative Conversations,” is one of the programs that we offer at GMC. Many of our members have not had appropriate stimulation and attention from significant others who were emotionally available during their childhood. Thus, many of our members have a fragile sense of self. Through programming, our members get the opportunity to develop a stronger sense of themselves.

The goal for the conversation group is for members to get a chance to become more aware of their communication styles. They reflect on their role in the group and in relation to each other, and they reflect on their diverse ideas, emotions, and actions. This helps them become better at understanding and tolerating diversity — both inside and outside the group. Mindful, creative conversations increase empathy and respect for each participant. They achieve insights that help them create a sense of self that they can carry to their community and unique life challenges.

—Kirsten Madsen, Volunteer

## Save the Date: Georgetown 5k Race Against Homelessness

Save the Date! The 2nd annual Georgetown 5k Race Against Homelessness will be on Saturday, October 17, 2015. We are going to have an awesome route this year and combine post-race festivities with the tailgate for Georgetown University’s football game that afternoon.

If your company or organization is interested in sponsoring the 5k, please contact Stephanie Chan, Communications Director, to learn more. Reach her by email at [stephanie@gmcgt.org](mailto:stephanie@gmcgt.org) or by phone at 202-338-8301 ext. 3.

*Train for the 5k with GMC staff! Gunther will be leading a training group starting July 1 on Mondays and Thursdays at noon. All abilities are welcome, walkers and runners alike! If you're interested in joining, let Gunther know by emailing [gunther@gmcgt.org](mailto:gunther@gmcgt.org) or calling 202-338-8301 ext. 6.*

## Board of Directors

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St. John’s Episcopal Church - Jocelyn Dyer  
St. Luke’s United Methodist Church - Dorothy Preston  
St. Paul’s K Street - Jeremiah Cassidy  
St. Stephen the Martyr - Laura Wilson*

### **From the community**

*Citizens Association of Georgetown - Page Robinson  
Georgetown Business Association - Elizabeth Webster  
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Georgetown Clergy Association - John Graham  
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Susan Weber*

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*Psychiatry  
Ron Koshes, M.D.  
Michael Morse, M.D.; Psychiatric Resident (with GWU)*

### *Family Practice*

*Catherine Crosland, M.D. (with Unity Health Care)*

## A Challenge of a Different Kind

For many years, the Gwendolyn and Morris Cafritz Foundation has been a core supporter of Georgetown Ministry Center. This year, they are helping us leverage more support by making part of their award a \$5,000 matching grant. If you gave generously last winter, thank you so much! If you are not yet a supporter or haven't given recently, now is the perfect time to do so.

Help us meet this match by telling a friend about our work and encouraging them to give and match your gift to GMC. We love making new friends, so please reach out to us if you'd like to set up a tour of our center, time to do street outreach with our doctors, or a coffee chat with staff.

Your gift makes a difference in the lives of every person we serve. Thank you so much for your support!

## 2014 Annual Report

Georgetown Ministry Center's 2014 Annual Report is now available online. In it is an overview of GMC's programs and accomplishments and financials for fiscal year 2014.

You can view the report on our website at [GeorgetownMinistryCenter.org](http://GeorgetownMinistryCenter.org). If you would like a hard copy of the report, please contact us at 202-338-8301 or email [stephanie@gmcgt.org](mailto:stephanie@gmcgt.org).

## Another Successful Winter Shelter

Every winter, ten churches in Georgetown work together to shelter and feed ten individuals with whom we work closely to guide toward stability and housing. Achieving this means many late nights and countless hours encouraging, working with, and constantly following up with our shelter residents. This year, we sheltered a total of fourteen people: nine men and five women.

We are happy to report the following successes from this year's shelter season. We helped three residents find housing. Two others reunited with their families and moved back home to be with them, and two other residents are gainfully employed.

For the past few years, we've also had a pretty international group in our shelter. This year, residents came from Iran, Russia, and Ethiopia, to name a few. We helped one resident obtain his green card, and he is currently studying for his US citizenship test.

Of course, the shelter would not be possible without the many amazing volunteers who prepared gourmet dinners each night, joined our residents for dinner, and spent the night to support staff.

This winter, 732 shelter volunteers spent a total of 2,673 hours at our shelter. Our volunteers included congregation members, college students from Georgetown University, and the staff of the Georgetown BID. Thank you!

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