

# Recipients give back to group during Footsteps for Families

The organization that helps the homeless soon may be homeless itself. It is searching for new quarters.

By [Courtney Cutright](#)

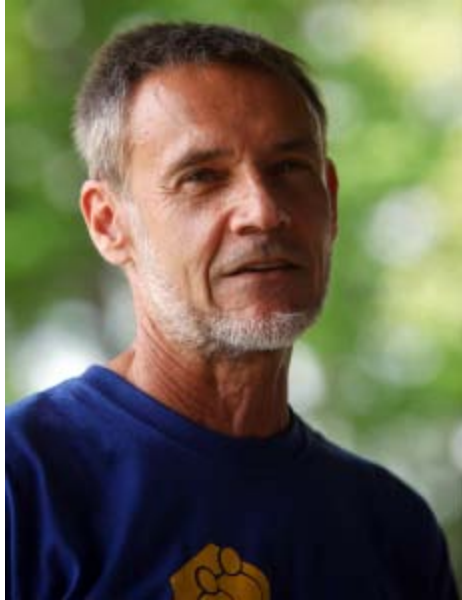
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Left: Renee Cockram holds her 2-year-old daughter, Amber Cockram, on her shoulders as she participates in the Roanoke Valley Interfaith Hospitality Network "Footsteps for Families" fundraising walk. Center: John McDowell, head of the interfaith ministry, talks to participants before Sunday's 1.8-mile walk. Right: Participants pray before they begin their walk.



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Photos by KYLE GREEN The Roanoke Times

Participants walk Sunday during the Roanoke Valley Interfaith Hospitality Network's fifth annual "Footsteps for Families" fundraising event.

Renee Cockram, 28, was pregnant and homeless two years ago.

Through the Roanoke Valley Interfaith Hospitality Network, Cockram and her year-old son found a place to stay: St. John's Episcopal Church in downtown Roanoke. She was sleeping at the church when she went into labor with her daughter, Amber, in March 2008.

Cockram and her two children were among the more than 40 walkers Sunday at the network's fundraiser, Footsteps for Families: A Walk To End Family Homelessness.

"They have done a lot for me and I wanted to show my thanks," Cockram said.

The 1.8-mile loop at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Salem raised nearly \$8,000. Sunday was the fifth annual event.

The network has helped more than 300 families since 1997 by forming partnerships with congregations across the Roanoke Valley. Volunteers at churches, a temple, a synagogue and an Islamic center provide food and shelter for four homeless families at a time. The families eat dinner, sleep and have breakfast at a host congregation and spend the day at the network's family center on the VA campus.

Executive Director John McDowell said families can stay in the network for up to 90 days and the average stay is about 50 days.

"In this economy, it takes families longer to secure jobs," he said.

There is another trend, too -- more single fathers are in need of a place to live.

Drew Purcell, the network's case manager, said recently that a father with three daughters ages 1, 3 and 5 turned to the organization for help. He said the man fled with the children from the home where he lived with their mother because of her drug addiction.

"He decided for the good of his girls to leave the home that they shared," Purcell said.

The man receives disability insurance payments, and network officials directed him to sign up for food stamps and Medicaid for his daughters. The network is working with the family to get them back on their feet and into a permanent home.

In addition to food and shelter, the network may provide bus passes, prescription vouchers and help with apartment security deposits. About 70 percent of the families served have found permanent housing, McDowell said.

"It not about proselytizing, it is about basic human needs, food and shelter," said Katie Elmore, president of the network's board and a member of Salem Presbyterian Church.

She said the homeless families served are the working poor: individuals working minimum-wage jobs who cannot provide child care, transportation and a place to live at that level of income.

Soon the network is going to have a need of its own. The space that houses the family center is being reclaimed by the VA because it is needed for a medical center expansion. The Interfaith Hospitality Network will have to relocate by January.

"The homeless organization is going to be homeless," Elmore said.

The board is searching for a new site, and Elmore said she would be delighted if someone comes forward with a potential home for the family center.