

Experts fear homeless teens' plight worsening

By ROBERT McGRATH
Covenant House

The nation's largest privately funded and operated child care agency provided overnight shelter to homeless teens more than half a million times last year.

Sister Mary Rose McGeady, president of Covenant House, said the shelters her agency operates gave overnight refuge to homeless youths 523,457 times in the 12-month period ending June 30. Covenant House also provided outreach, aftercare and other follow-up services to needy youngsters 224,595 times during the same period.

The overnight visits and

counseling sessions represent nearly 28,000 individual youngsters. Since it launched its first shelter in 1969, Covenant House has helped more than 200,000 individual teens.

"These numbers demonstrate dramatically that teen homelessness is a serious problem in America today," Sr. Mary Rose said. "But the future is even more alarming. The worsening economic downturn will break the backs of many fragile families already on the edge, pushing even more youngsters into the

streets."

"State and local governments are battling severe budget problems and are cutting the kinds of programs that reach out to needy teens," she said. "It could be a very bleak and tragic winter for many kids."

Covenant House provides food, shelter, medical care, counseling and other services to runaways and homeless youngsters under 21. It operates major programs in New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Dallas, Fort Lauderdale, New Orleans, Trenton, Newark,

Atlantic City, Anchorage, Toronto, Guatemala, Panama, Honduras and Mexico City. Its toll-free, nationwide hotline NINE LINE has answered more than 250,000 crisis calls from troubled teens since its inception in the fall 1987.

Sr. Mary Rose, who holds a graduate degree in clinical psychology, has spent more than 30 years serving homeless and handicapped children and young adults.

"In all my years of working with the poor, I have never seen

the level of government support for the needy fall so badly as have today. In many cases, just aren't any services available." Sister Mary Rose said. "My greatest hope is that despite the worsening economic situation, the American public will step forward to help meet the growing demand for services young people in need." The Covenant House, which serves this area, is located at S. St. James Place, Atlantic City. Call 348-4070 for further information.