

Homeless find support in Occupy Baltimore camp

By Erik Maza, *Baltimore Sun*, Oct. 27, 2011

Marcus Clary beams when he shows off his new home by the Inner Harbor. The place isn't much, just an orange tent under a blue tarp that fits four, but it's the best digs by far he's had in three weeks. Before, he was at a homeless shelter.

"At the shelter, you got one meal a day, and it was a small TV dinner and water. Here, the food is way better," the 21-year-old said. "I have lived at a lot worse places. We have mats here, sleeping bags over the mats, and blankets on top of that."

The Occupy Baltimore protest has attracted diverse constituencies — young people upset over social inequity and Wall Street overindulgence, office workers frustrated with stagnant pay, curiosity-seekers peering at all the ruckus.

Drawn by a shared sense of outrage, and by the free food and blankets, about a dozen homeless people have joined the protesters, and some organizers say more are likely to come.

City officials and advocates expressed concern that the protest was drawing the homeless away from shelters.

The protest, which counts more than 30 participants during the day and up to 150 at night, has attracted the homeless with available food and a sense of safety. Each night, a food committee makes vegetarian dinners to serve at least 100 people, and restaurants such as Joe Squared pizzeria have donated food. Coffee and snacks are always available.

There's also a "comfort station," where organizers stock up on blankets and other sleeping supplies that have been donated to the protest.

The number of people there provides a safe environment that appeals to the homeless. At shelters, Clary felt threatened.

"People steal. People fight," he said. "The shelter was good, but the people — you had to watch your back."

At the Occupy Baltimore camp in McKeldin Square, he has been embraced. Though he slept outdoors the first night, he has shared a tent with protester Ashley Bridges and her two friends the three weeks since.

The homeless "are attracted to the free food and a safe place to stay for the night," said Daniel Willis, 47, a homeless Baltimore native who says he suffers from bipolar disorder and hasn't found work in years. "And being part of something that's bigger than themselves, to make a small statement."

Willis says the Occupy protests remind him of the movements of the 1960s and '70s.

"It's bigger than anything I've seen in a long time," he said. "I want to help out. I don't want just a free handout."

Despite the differences between the protesters and the homeless, the two groups do have something in common: They are part of communities that have often felt left out of political discourse. They say the platform at McKeldin Square or Zuccotti Park in Manhattan, albeit temporary, is galvanizing.

"They are people who don't have a voice in government," said participant Jeffrey Schatz, a manager at the Freshii restaurant on Light Street. "People come up and say, 'These are my issues,' and then we work as a community to see what actions can be taken to fix that issue."

That some of the homeless are there simply for the free food and coffee is obvious to some of the protesters. There have also been instances of scuffles.

"We had a discussion about it, and the question was, 'Are we going to be doing charity?'" Schatz said. But "there's another way to look at it. These people are part of our community, and we're just sharing our resources."

He said homeless people are having exchanges at McKeldin Square that are more positive than those to which they're accustomed. But city officials have raised concerns about homeless people congregating at the Inner Harbor.

Kate Briddell, director of the mayor's homeless services program, defended shelters in Baltimore.

"I'm not sure why anyone would be interested in McKeldin Square at all," she said. "There are other resources that folks can access."

As word spread about the blankets and growing size of the encampment, City Councilman William H. Cole IV expressed concern that the homeless would go to McKeldin Square instead of reaching out for professional help.

"If there are homeless residents there that need services, we should be reaching out to them," he said. "We've invested a lot into homeless services and outreach, and I hope we don't start rolling back on that because we have this artificial campground."

The city has been circumspect on its plans for the encampment, with the mayor and other officials advocating compromise. But even if the encampment were to be torn down or pushed out, Clary said he would press on.

"I would leave for Philadelphia or New York, wherever I feel I could get to," he said. "I'm not going to leave the movement. I'm going to stay until the end."