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## **Homeless face losing refuge in garage**

DONYELLE DAVIS/staff photographer

The dark corners of the Civic Center parking garage are the closest thing Nathan Prasad has to a home. The concrete floor is his bed.

Unemployed and battling drug addiction, Prasad, 23, is one of about a dozen homeless men and women who take shelter in the Monroe County-owned garage on cold nights. Some have come, off and on, for years or even decades.

The garage was privatized in 2003 and is owned by Civic Center Monroe County Local Development Corp., which is a nonprofit company created by county officials to take ownership of county assets.

Now, amid what operators say are growing customer complaints and declining sanitary conditions, the encampment is facing closure.

County officials and the owner of the firm that manages the parking garage acknowledged that plans are in place to keep homeless people from congregating in the garage. All declined to share specifics of those plans.

"We're looking at all of our options in order to provide the parking that our customers want, and that's a place that doesn't have homeless living there," said Richard Goldstein, an owner of Mapco Autoparks Ltd., which manages the garage. Changes, he said, will be made soon. But whether that includes locking the facility, more calls to police or some other security efforts was unclear.

Advocates are scrambling to find safe places for people such as Prasad, who said his drug addiction led to housing evictions, strained family relationships and now homelessness.

"This is my refuge. ... I was told it was a safe place to go," said Prasad, who hopes to enroll in college again. "As odd as it sounds, this parking garage is more comfortable than most of the shelters."

For some, the rules at area shelters ? which vary and can include prescribed check-in times, prohibitions on alcohol and mandatory church services ? make the garage preferable.

"The guys who live there are independent and don't want to live under anyone's rules," said Christopher Scribani, director of communications at Open Door Mission. "If they get kicked out (of the garage), they won't have a choice but to come reluctantly."

With winter descending, Scribani said Open Door Mission will be more flexible in its admission hours and policies, especially for those who have been denied entry at other shelters.

Sister Grace Miller of the House of Mercy has petitioned the city to find a new building that would be open to the homeless 24 hours a day. Miller said there are many impediments to people finding immediate housing, including lack of transportation, ID card requirements and sanctions for previous infractions at

shelters. With winter approaching, she said, time is of the essence.

"We're trying to get (the city) to realize that we have a serious issue at hand," she said. "If you're going to close (the garage), they should all have a place to go."

Monroe County Public Safety Director David Moore said the county has been trying to find other options for people who are living there.

"We couldn't arrest our way out of this issue. It's a social problem," said Moore, the former Rochester police chief, of previous removal efforts.

Although it is difficult to get a precise count of how many people are homeless at any given time, a county report released this year provides some idea of the problem's scope.

In an annual report for calendar year 2012, the Monroe County Department of Human Services reported placing 8,348 individuals and families in emergency housing. The primary cause, 68 percent, of homelessness was eviction; the second reason, 14 percent, involved those released from an institution without a plan for permanent housing. Institutions include jails, hospitals and substance abuse treatment programs.

"We're looking to see what we can do to help. We know that we're never going to alleviate the issue of homelessness, but those numbers are incredible and we need to reduce those," said Moore.

The Rochester Police Department has jurisdiction over the garage, but Moore said the county can improve safety by making Sheriff's Office personnel more visible in the garage until the issue can be directly solved.

RPD spokeswoman Sgt. Elena Correia said the department responds to incidents in the garage when called.

"On behalf of the county, we have our roles to play, but we don't have the authority to do certain things. It's imperative we have RPD, who has jurisdiction, as far as law enforcement," Moore said. "We want to protect fundamental rights for everyone in that garage."

Safety, however, is an even bigger concern for customers who park there daily.

Judy DiPaola, who has worked as a clerk for the county for decades, said garage conditions are discouraging, especially for those who are not previously aware of the environment.

"We have had people who have made comments that they are afraid to come here," she said. "They do a good job of spraying everything down with water ... but it's not very desirable. People are discouraged."

DiPaola said she sympathizes with the homeless and personally does not have an issue with them, but knows that they can make others feel very uneasy. She also sees the environment as an opportunity for others to commit crimes.

"Someone can pretend they're homeless and you turn your back and someone could be attacking you," she said. "Unfortunately, because (the homeless) don't have another place to go ... they come here because it's warm."

Indeed, Nathan Prasad is only looking for a safe haven to rest his head.

"I'd like to find something at least comparable (to the garage) and I don't even know if that's possible," Prasad

said of finding a new place to live. "People are just trying to make it down here and survive."

*DDAVIS11@DemocratandChronicle.com*

*<http://twitter.com/DonyelleDavis>*