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PUBLIC & PRIVATE; A Kind Place

By ANNA QUINDLEN

When I was in Moscow I was mesmerized by shopping. One store for bread, another for vegetables, a third for meat. And three lines: the line to order, the line to pay, the line to pick up purchases. It was a system so inefficient that I could not believe the women around me were not enraged. Instead everyone shrugged, the Russian shrug that means: "Always has been. Always will be."

In our country, this is how we handle the delivery of social services to the poor. Wake up in the shelter. Take a train to the welfare office. Wait an hour. Learn that they have lost your paperwork. Take a bus to the hospital for a clinic visit. Wait another hour. Pick up your kids at school. Take the bus to apply for space in a housing project. Take the kids on the train back to the shelter.

Always has been. Always will be.

Nope. Lightning has struck in this city, just across a shiny gunmetal stretch of harbor from the Statue of Liberty, and it is called the York Street Project. A building that houses homeless women and their children for up to 18 months. A high school for female dropouts. And a child care center that started out with 18 kids and is now up to 52. All together, in one place, with counseling and lots of help. So simple, so obvious, that it makes you wonder why it's not done everywhere.

"Condos for Christ," the older kids call the whole complex, because the nuns run it in one of those upwardly mobile areas where every factory building is now full of lofts, and because it is beautifully renovated and cleaner than most of our homes. The good sisters have not bought into the notion that poor people deserve the crummiest of accommodations. And it shows. Ask the women here what they've learned and they all say the same: self-respect.

Twenty-one families live in the part of the project called St. Joseph's Home. Some were burnt out of their apartments. Some left because of abusive men. Some got evicted. Many of the children arrive with no language. Now they talk. "He was sort of closed up," one mother says of her son. "Now he's telling me things I don't know." This is what happens. One little boy came home from a day trip and told his mother he'd been on a hayride. "What's a hayride?" she asked.

In one of the school corridors there is a plaque. " 'We pardon in the degree that we love' -- Martin Luther King Jr." We do not love these people. "Those people," they become in conversation. We blame them for their poverty, and so we find no fault with the systems that serve them, systems we pay for, systems that have contempt for their own consumers and so inevitably fail.

It seems so simple when you see it done correctly. A woman who has a safe place to leave her kids can finish high school. A woman who has a safe place to live knows there is something better than the streets. There's a verse from Ephesians on a plaque by the front desk -- "Be Ye Kind." This is a kind place.

It's not always easy. The first year the nuns started out with 25 women in the school, and ended up with five. Housing and child care problems were two reasons why, and that realization led to the transitional housing and the child care center. The high school has had 21 graduates, and will have 13 more in June. Eighty percent are going on to more education.

It costs \$1.8 million a year to run this place, which is no money at all, unless you don't have it. There was a grant from

H.U.D. and seed money from the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, who own the buildings. Both run out soon. Fortunately, nuns work cheap. If they were getting what their degrees and years of experience warrant, it would be much more expensive. But they're doing the work they signed on to do, saving souls.

"The dignity of the person," Sister Ann Taylor, the director, says of her management philosophy.

This all reminds me of public housing three decades ago, the grim monoliths that made tenants feel as if they were living in an ant farm and that looked, not coincidentally, like prisons. We learned our lesson, and now we build public housing on a human scale that does not imply that its tenants are inconsequential Lilliputians.

But the systems that serve the poor, the welfare offices, the hospitals, the shelters, are still great gray systems, big and reductive. It is time again to learn our lesson. In this small corner of the world, they've started the revolution without us. In a landscape of public policy failure, success. I'll be going back again, just to reassure myself that it can be done.