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Showing Love For Christmas

For most of us, Christmas is a joyful time of year filled with good food, Christmas carols, and memories with family and friends, but the holidays can be a time of grief and loneliness for City Mission residents.

"Many of our residents have been cast away from their families, and they find themselves alone," explained Leah Dietrich, City Mission's Director of Residential Programs. "Loss is a big part of it too. Some have lost children. Others may have lost friends or significant others to addiction. All of that can steal joy from the holidays."

"I know what it's like to be alone and to go through Christmas with nobody," added Dave, a current City Mission resident and employee. "It can be very emotional, and if I ever forget the pain I was in it could be really dangerous for me, because one mistake can put me right back where I was."

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, since 1999, there have been nearly 91,000 drug and alcohol related deaths in the United States during the month of December, more than any other month.

Dave has decided not to visit family this Christmas so he can stay at the Mission to support and encourage his fellow residents. "Some people might be a little down, so we try to do whatever we can to lift them up," he explained. "Some of them haven't had a real Christmas in years. We want to show them that even though, they might be estranged from their family, we're going to have a great Christmas here with good food, presents, and time to relax."

"The highest rates of relapse are typically around the holidays," Dietrich said, so City Mission goes above and beyond to provide a positive and memorable Christmas experience for the residents. "There's so much planning that goes into this whole month. We change everything to help our residents stay engaged and to keep them coming back."

City Mission decorates each of their four shelters during the Christmas season and shuttles vanloads of residents to Oglebay Park to see the Christmas lights. They provide presents to every resident and toys for them to take home to their kids. "We give a lot of people their first ever Christmas gift," Dietrich added. The Mission even sends out Christmas cards on behalf of the residents to their friends and family.

"We want everyone to know that they're loved and cared for and that we want them to have a special Christmas," Dietrich said. The annual Resident Christmas party is also coming up. It is a time to celebrate the residents with a specially-prepared meal served to the residents by City Mission staff.

Additionally, City Mission hosts a safe and sober New Year's Eve celebration, which is open to the whole community. It has grown every year since its inception. Last year, 250 people attended.

All residents who are planning to go home for the holidays are also required to attend a Holiday Relapse Prevention session where they create a personal plan to avoid triggers and find ways to do things that bring others joy. "Our holiday relapse rate has drastically decreased since we started this program," explained Dietrich.

City Mission residents also support and encourage each other at Christmastime. They spend the holidays together or stay in constant communication and provide transportation for those who find themselves in difficult situations.

"I can sum it all up in one word," said Dave. "Love. I didn't love myself when I got here let alone think that other people could love me. So if you're here at the Mission this Christmas, we're going to love on you and give you all the tools you need to be successful."

About City Mission: For over 75 years, City Mission has sheltered, healed, and restored the homeless to independent living—without discrimination. City Mission’s comprehensive program addresses both short-term needs like food and shelter, and long-term needs, including drug and alcohol counseling, mental health and medical treatment, legal aid, and employment training. City Mission’s goal is to help each man, woman, mother with children, or veteran who walks through our doors to become a healthy, productive member of society. With your help, we can help our residents renew their lives.