

PADS concerns split St. Paul meeting

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Another contentious and emotional debate raged this week over plans to open a homeless shelter site in Park Ridge, this time pitting parishioners of St. Paul of the Cross Catholic Church against each other.

An informational meeting held Monday night in the church's Holy Family Chapel drew a vocal, standing room only crowd that appeared equally divided between supporters and opponents of a once a week, Public Action to Deliver Shelter (PADS) overnight shelter for the homeless opening in St. Paul's Parish Life Center. A panel from Journeys from PADS to HOPE, the organization that oversees the shelters, explained the program and provided assurances of its safety.

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Many St. Paul parents are concerned that housing the homeless in a room that will be used later in the day as a gym may expose their children to disease and to individuals who may be mentally ill, substance abusers, or child predators. A number of parents wore buttons that read "Protect Our Children."

"I think you can tell us anything you want to tell us tonight, and I'm not sure that's going to make us all feel any better," said parent Tammy Kwiatkoski, who accused the Rev. Carl Morello, pastor, of not involving parents and parishioners in the decision to host a PADS site.

"We *will* leave the parish if this happens because it is not a safe environment," she added.

Lorna Amado Chevlin, an attorney and parent, said the background checks performed on PADS clients are inadequate because they do not include fingerprinting, and therefore, potentially dangerous individuals could be let in.

"Jesus would not mandate us to help one person at the risk of another, particularly the innocent children," Chevlin said.

Supporters say a PADS site in Park Ridge will help those in need and not be a danger to children.

"There's a kind of infection that we can't protect our kids from unless we work together. And that's the infection of selfishness," said Dr. Carol Graham, a physician and parishioner.

Some of the most ardent supporters speaking on the issue were teenaged and young adult parishioners.

"We should be teaching to follow the Gospels always, not only when it's comfortable," said Patrick Casey, 15.

"This is not Pleasantville. This is Park Ridge. We don't live in a bubble. Homelessness exists here and we need to do something about it," said Kaitlyn Schaefer, a 2001 St. Paul graduate.

Kim Schaefer, 18, said she has dealt with the homeless through her work in St. Paul's rectory and as an employee of the Prospect Avenue Starbuck's. "I've never been afraid," she said.