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**Homes for the Invisible**

By Margaret Morton

A quiet victory is taking place beneath the streets of New York City. Homeless people who for 20 years have occupied a two-mile stretch of unused railroad line under Riverside Park are packing up their belongings and moving into permanent housing. Their departure is a triumph of decency, but it also points out the dilemmas arising from government plans to help the homeless.

The so-called mole people began seeking refuge in the abandoned tunnel in the mid-1970's and lived there largely undisturbed until 1991, when Amtrak workers routed 50 people living in a labyrinthine village made of scavenged materials. Over the past four years, the population has grown back to its former size as people have been swept from encampments at the 72d Street overpass and the 79th Street rotunda.

Tunnel residents said that living underground seemed a reasonable choice. The city's shelters are dangerous, they said, and, despite the need to transport water and ward off rats, the tunnel offered protection from the elements and a sense of privacy and security.

Most of the tunnel people supported themselves by recycling cans or selling books and clothing on the street. Some got occasional odd jobs at Upper West Side apartment buildings.

But this existence changed over the summer when the tunnel entrances were sealed off by the Amtrak police, who threatened to arrest for trespassing anyone who stayed. Amtrak claimed that the encampment was a fire hazard.

What could have blown into a needless confrontation -- yet another incident of homeless people scrambling frantically before police in a desperate attempt to salvage belongings and pets -- was averted by the Coalition for the Homeless, a statewide nonprofit organization.

According to Mary Brosnahan, the director of the coalition, Amtrak reluctantly agreed to delay evicting the residents temporarily while the coalition looked into a languishing $9 million Federal program set up to provide vouchers for permanent housing to people living underground.

Although the program, created by Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Henry G. Cisneros after he toured the city's subway system, had been in place since November 1994, only two of its 250 vouchers had been used by this summer. Ms. Brosnahan said that most of the non-profit groups that administer the vouchers have been hesitant to give them to people in need of drug treatment and mental-health counseling, since these services are not included in the Federal program.

Nevertheless, workers from the coalition and other groups went into the tunnel to help residents get vouchers and also to place them in treatment programs. Seven people have vouchers, which can be used to get apartments in privately owned buildings, and two dozen more should be getting their vouchers soon.

That the tunnel people needed a special Federal program to get homes also reflects a general problem with our relief system: virtually all housing is held for families. Of course, children should get priority. But this program is one of very few that addresses the needs of single adults.

It is true that this voucher program put the needs of those living undergound ahead of those of people in less extreme situations. But it demonstrates how even those most adamant about spurning the shelter system will accept suitable housing -- something with economic benefits for the city. It costs more than $20,000 a year to keep a person in a cot on an armory floor. It costs about $12,000 to keep that person in the kind of supported housing being made available to the tunnel people.

There are solutions to homelessness. The people leaving the tunnel are proof.