



At the Queens County Youth Outreach Project at 74-09 Myrtle Ave., Rev. Coleman Costello (center) reviews a new case with staff members Don Hough (l.) and John Shuhan

Priest helps to save strung-out kids

By RON HOWELL

The Rev. Coleman Costello believes that hundreds of mostly middle-class teenagers—all of them down and out from drugs or other personal problems—would have nowhere to go if he closed the doors to his tiny storefront office in Glendale.

The Youth Outreach Project of the Queens County Youth Development Corporation, headed by Rev. Costello, serves more than 150 youngsters a month and, thanks to a grant last week of \$157,000 from the State Division of Substance Abuse Services, the program will be able to continue its work for another year.

"A lot of the kids have run away or been thrown out of their homes," said Rev. Costello. "They are on their own, and sometimes the only way for them to get along is to hustle their bodies, sell drugs or burglarize."

Rev. Costello and his staff try to catch these teenagers before they are too far gone, a task that involves sitting down with the kids, talking with them and coming up with some practical advice, such as to enter a drug program, to find a job or to participate in a skill training center.

But most often the trouble is drugs—like the heroin and angel dust sold openly at Forest Park, which is a pebble's toss from the storefront at 74-09 Myrtle Ave.

Drugs are always present

The widespread use of drugs by young people is an issue that Rev. Costello and his workers live with virtually every day. He talks, for instance, about the 23-year-old angel dust user who fell into his arms just several nights ago, crying and babbling about wanting to join the Marines.

To document the pervasiveness of drug sales in Forest Park, which Rev. Costello calls the drug mecca of Queens, he went one recent night to the dome area of the park, near the parking lot, and used a hand-held "clicker" to count the number of people who made purchases within an hour's time.

The number was 100, a disconcertingly large figure but one which was down from the 200 sales an hour he had counted about a year ago.

One of Rev. Costello's constant worries is that he cannot always offer immediate help to the drug abusers who, at their wits' end, finally decide they need professional attention. He pointed out that one popular drug program has a waiting list that is two weeks long—an almost unbearably long time for a boy or girl in need of shelter and help right away.

To close this gap, the board of the Queens County Youth Development Corporation recently purchased a

home in Ridgewood and will open it as a temporary residence for homeless kids as soon as enough money is raised for renovation and additional staff.

Two of the young staffers now working under Rev. Costello, Donny Hough and John Sheean, are called "outreach" workers and, as their title suggests, they do not simply wait in the office for wayward youngsters to wander in.

Rather, wearing their red T-shirts with the name of the program printed on them, they go to the local parks and other hangouts and try to talk with kids who seem to need their help. And, if their first approach is rebuffed, the outreach workers at least attempt to leave their calling cards in the hope they will be used at some future moment of despair, when no one else is available.

Rev. Costello said that many of the teens who come to the program from Glendale, Richmond Hill, Middle Village, Maspeth and other communities find it difficult to get jobs, even when they have begun successfully to deal with their drug habits.

Middle-class backgrounds

"These kids come from middle-class backgrounds but they still often are at a reading level of no more than sixth or seventh grade," he said. "They are pretty much out of the job market."

But the 38-year-old priest also said he believes the youngsters can find some kind of employment, if they

receive proper guidance and attention. And that's why he wants someday soon to hire a full-time job developer who would have the responsibility of matching the kids with jobs and training programs that meet their individual talents.

Rev. Costello, who has a round face and a ruddy complexion, made a trip to Albany not too long ago to offer legislators there some insights into his work. What he had to say so impressed Assemblyman John C. Dearie (D-Bronx), chairman of the Committee on Cities, that the assemblyman recently visited Rev. Costello's Glendale storefront so he could learn about it up close.

"I decided that unless I see it and feel it locally I could not get a sense of what is being done here," the assemblyman said while visiting the storefront.

"Getting a sense of it" is precisely the approach used by the staff at the Youth Project in its effort to reach troubled juveniles in their habitats, and Rev. Costello is convinced he is a last resort for many of these young people.

"These are kids who have fallen through all the cracks," he said. "The social service agencies are not even aware of their existence."

At the end of an interview with him, Rev. Costello looked up and then, as if he had suddenly remembered to mention the most important point, said, "Oh yes. Please tell them they can call us at 398-7015."



Project director Rev. Coleman Costello counsels a troubled teenager privately