

Chinook Observer

Diverse needs met by new shelter service

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Nichole Lopez, and AmeriCorps member, works with Overnight Winter Lodging staff to prepare rooms for the shelter's homeless guests.



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Overnight Winter Lodging is hosted on a rotation between the Peninsula Church of the Nazarene, Peninsula Church Center and St. Mary's Catholic Church.



The shelter's lodging is divided between men and women and each guests sets up their own space for the night.

PENINSULA — A group of people with no place to sleep waited outside St. Mary's Catholic Church for the county's only homeless shelter to open its doors Friday night.

Roughly two weeks after Overnight Winter Lodging (OWL) opened, the shelter has housed eight people. Three of them are on waiting lists for full-time housing, said Nichole Lopez, an AmeriCorps volunteer working at OWL.

"Homelessness was hard to spot in the county because people often tuck away in the woods or sand dunes," Lopez said. "It was hard to find them to help."

OWL, founded by Peninsula Poverty Response, rotates between St. Mary's, the Peninsula Church of the Nazarene and Peninsula Church Center five nights a week. Funded by a combination of county, state and private dollars, OWL's first season is considered a trial-run with the hope of becoming a nightly shelter next winter, Lopez said.

Part of Lopez's role is to bridge the gap between homeless people and government resources. OWL also has two Coastal Community Action Program case managers working with guests to get into housing.

“Just a month ago, it looked like we didn’t have enough community support to get OWL started,” Lopez said. “Now, we’re seeing people get excited about what it can do.”

Their story

On Jan. 15, a mom, a bartender, a veteran, a fisherman, a Kentuckian and a nomad slept on St. Mary’s floors.

The guests operated within a routine. Some pulled sleeping mats out of OWL’s trailer as others stored their belongings.

“Even though they’ve all ended up in the same place, they have very different stories,” said OWL volunteer Diane Knutson. “We don’t ask their stories, they don’t come here to get asked a lot of questions. But, like any normal conversation, they sometimes come up.”

Some guests were homeless for a few days, others for decades, she said.

Raul Ros served in the army for eight years. He was stationed in Tacoma and Turkey and deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.

When Ros left the military, he started drinking. He realized his change in behavior was a result of post-traumatic stress and looked for help through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. But he said he felt lost among the VA’s paperwork in the chaos of Tacoma.

“I felt safer in my car, driving, and listening to music,” Ros said. “It didn’t matter that I ended up sleeping in my car, when they next day I could just drive again.”

He was on his way to Portland’s VA offices with his girlfriend Linda Bourn when their car ran out of gas in Long Beach. They slept in the car overnight then walked to McDonald’s in the morning, where they heard about the shelter.

Within a week and a half, the couple met with personnel from the state Department of Social and Health Services twice and were put on a list to receive financial aid to pay for an apartment.

Ros said OWL volunteers are the same people whose day jobs are spent helping others, such as social workers, DSHS employees and preachers.

“Now all we need is a landlord to take a chance on two people who are homeless,” Ros said. “The amazing thing is, with the people we have helping us, I really think that’s going to happen.”

Volunteers needed

About 30 minutes before lights went out for bedtime in the shelter, the room was loud and conversations overlapped.

“This is what it’s supposed to be like,” Knutson said looking at the mix of guests and four volunteers.

Knutson was working a shift from 7 p.m. to midnight and others would be there throughout the night.

Lopez said OWL aims to have two volunteers present at all times, but they’ve been limited on people for the night shift. Some volunteers have worked all night twice a week.

“For this to be sustainable and even grow, we need to make sure we don’t overwork our volunteers,” she said.

Applications to volunteer with OWL can be found online at peninsulapovertyresponse.com.