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Churches agree to house homeless people this winter

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PENINSULA — This winter, the Peninsula's homeless population will have access to an overnight shelter for the first time and, come spring, the possibility of a move into long-term housing.

The Peninsula Poverty Response [PPR] announced on Dec. 4 they're pairing with the Peninsula Church of the Nazarene and St Mary's Catholic Church to host people in Pacific County who otherwise would sleep outside.

The churches will host on a rotation and the shelter will be open five nights a week from Jan. 1 through Feb., said PPR's Americorps member Nichole Lopez.

"Right now, we have the attitude that five nights a week is better than nothing and we're excited to offer that much," Lopez said. "That number could increase as we find more volunteers and hosts."

OWL for those in need

The shelter, known as Overnight Winter Lodging [OWL], is a combined effort by PPR, the county and community members, said the county's deputy director of Public Health & Human Services Katie Lindstrom.

Lindstrom, who is also a member of PPR, said the shelter is using December to try and secure volunteers. PPR aims to have at least two volunteers at the shelter throughout the night on four hour shifts, meaning eight to 10 volunteers each night.

Lindstrom said the county is also trying to secure a state grant of \$220,000 a year to provide permanent housing for people who are homeless. The grant, known as the Housing and Urban Development Bonus Fund, could support 18 people who live outside to move indoors.

“The idea is that we can build connections with the people we serve in the shelters this winter, and work to move them into homes in March,” she said.

Good chances for grant

The top four counties who applied to the grant are expected to receive funding, and Pacific County ranked number one, Lindstrom said. The county is now waiting to see if the state receives the needed federal funding to support the program.

Lindstrom said if the county receives the grant, they will partner with local organizations, like Willapa Behavioural Health, to connect people with case managers after they are housed.

“It’s hard to expect someone to get clean from addiction or whatever else if they’re living outside,” Lindstrom said. “We want to meet their most basic need and then connect them with other services.”

Lopez said when PPR announced their goal to form the winter shelter, she was worried about the community’s response.

“It’s the first time the county is doing this, and I know it’s a big commitment, but the Peninsula has already shown so much support,” she said.

Working together

Co-pastor at the Peninsula Church of the Nazarene Karen Humber said her church agreed to be one of the hosts for the shelter because they viewed it as an opportunity for the community to work for its neighbors.

“We hope to see a lot of people step forward,” she said. “Nobody wants to sleep in the rain and now our county has the chance to help house whoever needs it for whatever reason.”

People interested in volunteering for the Overnight Winter Lodging or donating non-perishable items can contact PPR at 253-254-5604 or ppramericorps@gmail.com. She said the team is also looking for a loaned, donated or rented covered 12 foot storage trailer.

There will be a volunteer training session on Dec. 29, at 1 p.m. at St. Mary’s Catholic Church and another offered on Jan. 2, 2016, at 1 p.m. at Peninsula Church of the Nazarene. Volunteer applications are available at peninsulapovertyresponse.com.