

SHELTER: Some neighbors have expressed concerns

Continued from page 1

and their ideas for ways that we can help increase their confidence that they and their families will be safe.”

The shelter is a “low-barrier” shelter, which means access to what it offers is available to those who come. One neighbor is concerned about what kind of background checks or drug tests are done on guests “to assure safety in the neighborhood.” Another questioned what the shelter is doing to address the causes of the guests’ homelessness and helping them get into a better situation.

The mission of the SCWS is to provide emergency shelter during the coldest months of the year. There is a homeless networking group that has been meeting monthly since last spring to address some of the larger issues and look for more permanent long-term solutions and support.

Lois Kaping, who served as the steering committee co-chair for the first two years and is now the Westside Church liaison to the shelter, provided statistics for the three years the shelter has been in operation.

The shelter doors opened in January 2017, the winter of extreme cold and heavy snowfall. Unfortunately, just two weeks before the shelter opened, a Sisters man who was living in his car died either from exposure or carbon monoxide poisoning.

During the first three months of 2017, the shelter provided 860 bed nights for 44 different people and served 1,900 meals. In the winter of 2017-18, with the shelter open for four months, the shelter provided 870 bed nights for 52 different people, and provided 2,000 meals. So far in 2018-19, in three months, 43 different people have used 653 bed nights, and enjoyed 1,400 meals.

The shelter is expected to be open this year through the end of March, if a facility can be located for the last month.

Currently, three local churches open their doors for the shelter: Westside Church, Sisters Community Church, and the Episcopal Church of the Transfiguration. At SCC, the shelter is housed in The Hangar, which is located off of McKinney Butte Road near Sisters Christian Academy and the Sisters Middle School.

Therein lies the crux of the neighbors’ concerns: the proximity of the three churches providing shelter space to surrounding neighborhoods and schools. The churches were all located in a core area around Trinity Way a number of years ago when that was the outskirts of Sisters. In the ensuing years, neighborhoods have grown up around the churches.

The shelter operates with a specific code of conduct that all guests must agree to, including arrival and departure times. There are always two monitors onsite to meet the needs of the guests and ensure everyone’s comfort and safety. To be a volunteer monitor, one must attend a required training session and submit to a background check. The overnight monitors who come on at 10:30 p.m. and stay until 7 a.m., are paid trained employees.

Special training in mental health “first aid” is offered to the volunteers but, at this time, is not required. Questions were raised at the meeting about such training as well as the availability of crisis intervention specialists.

A representative of Deschutes County Behavioral Health said there is a mobile crisis team available to respond to mental health emergencies 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year to assess a client and advocate for available resources. The mental health concerns are something the steering committee will be discussing.

There was a great deal of support for the shelter evident at the meeting, with people saying they are glad to know there’s a place for the homeless to go, that volunteering is a great joy to serve, and that the time spent at the

shelter with the guests is a positive experience. Pastor Jerry Kaping of Westside said that in three years time they have not had one negative experience involving the shelter. The community has been supportive with monetary support, volunteer hours, meal preparation, and donations of needed supplies for the shelter and its guests.

There were questions regarding crime statistics as related to the homeless and

“ Those who have ideas and want to see something happen would be welcome. —George Myers

Sisters in general. Lt. Ty Rupert, watch commander for the Deschutes County Sheriff’s Office, reported that in all of 2018 in Sisters, there were five crimes committed by homeless or transient people. Officers had a total of seven contacts, including traffic stops, four of which were passing through Sisters.

Each month, the DCSO provides to the City Council the Vicinity Case Report for the previous month. The average number of cases reported

See SHELTER on page 29

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