

Sears Shelter is nice, dry, safe place for a homeless person to come home to

By Jack Rubinger
The Southwest Portland Post

Celeste Duvall has only kind words for a woman recovering from



Debbie Wright appreciates the safety of the Sears Shelter on an early December evening. (Post photo by Jack Rubinger)

pneumonia. It's a blustery, rainy night in December at the Sears Shelter on Multnomah Boulevard in Southwest Portland.

In addition to being the manager of the newly opened shelter, Duvall led the media on a tour of the facility and introduced us to several folks including Roma Peyser and Stacy Borke of Transition Projects.

The facility which Mayor Charlie Hales and wife Nancy Hales launched on Thanksgiving Day will provide a nice dry safe place to come home to for Portland's homeless population — for six months. After that, the building transitions into an emergency response center for the west side.

"Is this your first time here?" asked a volunteer. The drill is pretty simple. People arrive at 6:45 p.m., they sign some paperwork, they can get a cup hot chocolate, coffee, tea, and a cup of soup, then they settle in for the night. There are board games, art supplies, clean sleeping quarters, good food, and room for companion pets.

The Sears Shelter

opened following Mayor Hales' and City Council's declaration of a State of Emergency in Affordable Housing and Homelessness on Oct. 7.

In less than two months, partners made arrangements with the federal government, service providers, transportation providers, and neighborhood residents to provide shelter just as nights began to dip below freezing.

Transition Projects, the city's largest emergency shelter provider, is operating the Sears Shelter which is open 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. daily.

The city has contracted with a shuttle service to provide transportation for the first two weeks of shelter operations, and then Ride Connection for the remaining five-and-a-half months. With the nearest bus line a half-mile away, the city is providing guests with transportation to and from the Sears Shelter.

"It's a gift to show them there's hope," said Duvall. "Too many don't see them as humans." As manager of this new shelter, Duvall and her team have been working 16 hours a day to help many of the men and women who are victims of sexual assault and other forms of violence. "Living on the street is traumatic," she said.

There are several rooms in different sizes. Red cushioned sleeping mats and blue tape mark out areas for each individual to sleep and room to store belongings. It is pretty basic, but it's clean and well-organized.

"We need more resources like mental health services, employment services, and medical services. The mayor and the city stepped up and did the right thing by turning an armory into a shelter," said Duvall.

With her Christmas sweater and a mini-wreath around her head, 60-year-old Debbie Wright looked appropriately festive for the season, but Wright has some serious setbacks. She lost her apartment because of noise issues and she suffers from

fibromyalgia.

Wright is trying to get a new place to live, but until then the shelter is home. She tears up quickly but recovers when she recalls the mayor blowing her a kiss when the Sears Shelter opened.

Scott Rice provided the first sack lunches during the second week, as well as the first hot meal to the shelter on Sunday and considers himself the food guy. He's been a community volunteer for more than eight years feeding the homeless.

"There's food everywhere," he said. "Nobody lets something go to waste. Everybody shares in this town. We feed people gourmet food, but we won't house them. That's our problem."

Another good thing? Four women from the shelter recently found jobs. They rely on TriMet for transportation, but at least they can leave their property at the shelter. It's awkward to bring two suitcases to work every day.



Currently, the shelter averages 35 women a night and the facility is still getting known. "When people are out in the streets they're in survival mode," explained Duvall. "Then they can focus on jobs and the next steps into their lives."

Unfortunately, homelessness is not just a downtown Portland issue. People are living under underpasses and people are migrating. They're wondering what's tonight going to bring?


This shelter features different size rooms because some don't like big crowds. Duvall described a family unit...mother, daughter, niece, and "street" family.

As more people continued to flow in past 7 p.m., I noticed one particularly well-groomed woman who looked like she'd just gotten off work from a downtown office. While I didn't get a chance to talk to her, I wondered about her story.

"We misjudge people on the streets," explained Rice. "We need to recognize humanity."

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