

# Reaching out in St. Johns

*Far from major services and programs, the faith-based community and advocates come together to help the homeless in Portland's northern neighborhood*

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Her day starts early. Around 5 a.m. she gets up. She's spent the night behind a church. Sometimes it's a school. Other times, she sleeps in a park.

Fifty-three-year-old Sandy Gaudio has been homeless for the past year. Her day starts early because it has to. She needs to avoid the police, who, she says, have slapped her with trespassing charges for sleeping behind those schools and churches. She would sleep in a shelter, but Gaudio lives in North Portland's St. Johns neighborhood, and that, she says, doesn't leave her with much of a choice.

"The problem," she says, "is the shelters and things are downtown. I don't have bus fare to get there."

Homeless advocates say Gaudio's predicament isn't unique. For years, homeless services have coalesced in Portland's downtown, with only scant offerings in other neighborhoods. But, say advocates this heavy concentration doesn't reflect where homeless Portlanders actually live.

Later this month, the Portland Housing Bureau will release its biennial count of the city's homeless. Since it began the street counts in 2002, the city's methodology has grown increasingly sophisticated. The result: the numbers are starting to reflect where the city's homeless actually live. However progress has been slow, and some claim, not all neighborhoods are scrutinized equally.

St. Johns' neighborhood advocates claim their community hasn't been given the attention it deserves. Over the years, they say, this has made it hard for St. Johns' homeless to get the help they need. As Portlanders await the new numbers, St. Johns' neighborhood groups are slowly adding services for what many suspect is a growing homeless population.

## Church of North Portland

"One of the biggest things I noticed was the inefficiency and lack of unity," says David Brewer about his decision to help St. Johns homeless.

Brewer is the founder of the nonprofit AllOne Community Services, which has been largely responsible for organizing St. Johns churches to help the community's homeless.

Three years ago, Brewer says, when AllOne first started, not only did St. Johns lack many basic services — especially shelters and temporary housing — but nobody really knew which community organization was providing what service.

"So I started to meet with pastors to see if there would be any interest in collaborating," says Brewer. "And it just started growing — more and more churches, more and more neighborhood associations, and more and more businesses."

Brewer — a former computer programmer and project manager with Kaiser Permanente — has proven to be a competent



Operation Nightwatch's mobile van provides hospitality for people on the streets. The van and Operation Nightwatch is joining a concerted effort to reach out to people experiencing homelessness in North Portland.

PHOTO BY GARY DAVIS

organizer. By his estimates, AllOne currently claims about 40 churches as members that now collectively call themselves the Church of North Portland. AllOne has also worked with about 20 secular nonprofits, as well as 15 businesses. The results are noticeable.

To date, Church of North Portland members have set up emergency warming shelters—for those especially cold winter nights — at three St. Johns churches. The group has also been taking unsold produce from the farmers' market and giving it to homeless and low-income community members. And last August, the group held the first Compassion North Portland event, a day of free medical and dental care put on at Roosevelt High School. The same event is scheduled for later this summer.

And Brewer and the Church of North Portland aren't the only ones creating change in St. Johns.

## Operation Nightwatch Rolls in

It's a sunny Friday evening in May and Mikaila Smith and Matt Tuttle are unloading Operation Nightwatch's "Mobile Hospitality Center," a massive RV that's been outfitted as a food pantry/first-aid center on wheels. The two set up chairs and tables as a handful of volunteers start unpacking the food.

Smith, a pierced and tattooed Portland State University student with a notable knack for social work, runs the show. Tuttle, an Iraq War vet and medical student at Heald College, is there to provide basic first-aid to those who show up. Tonight they're in

Southeast Portland in a cul-de-sac just off the Springwater Corridor Trail, the MAX line, and Interstate 205. This month they started serving the St. Johns neighborhood on Wednesdays.

Once the tables are set and the food is out, they start coming. Many come by bike via the trail, others walk, while others, including families — many visibly embarrassed by their circumstances — come by car. By the time the sun has gone down, Smith, Tuttle, and their volunteers will have helped about 35 people.

"It's an easy model," says Smith about the hospitality van, "Because you can take it anywhere."

That, says Operation Nightwatch Executive Director Gary Davis, is the point. "We are serving those folks who might not be served otherwise," says Davis.

Operation Nightwatch isn't a shelter. According to Davis, the idea behind Nightwatch — which also runs a brick-and-mortar center downtown — is to pick up where shelters leave off. This means helping folks who don't go to shelters, such as many homeless families who, Davis says, prefer the "invisibility" of sleeping in their cars. This also helps those who can't afford to get to shelters because their neighborhoods just don't have them. Which is why, Davis says, his group is heading to St. Johns.

## The Anawim Church

Sandy Gaudio eats a bowl of homemade chicken soup in the basement of the Church of North Portland. On the ground next to her is the reason she can make it through

those tough nights sleeping behind buildings. His name is Taz. He's a black-and-white Chihuahua.

"Thank God he barks," says Gaudio, "because without him I would hardly get any sleep."

Gaudio and about 23 St. Johns residents — some homeless, some not — have gathered in the church basement for to eat soup, drink soda, and hear Pastor Steve Kimes sing and preach.

"All I can say is this: last year there were almost no services for homeless in St. Johns," Kimes told Street Roots. "And now there are churches that are actively stepping up and helping the homeless."

Kimes leads the Anawim Christian Community, a church he and his wife, Diane, organized for the homeless and mentally ill about 20 years ago in Gresham. A little over a year ago, two Anawim parishioners, a couple named Tim Childress and Samantha Ehrman, got off the street and moved to St. Johns after Childress got work. Shortly after moving to St. Johns, Childress and Ehrman started feeding homeless in the neighborhood's parks. Kimes says the two then suggested he bring Anawim to St. Johns. Now the church meets two days a week in the Northeast neighborhood. Kimes says he, Childress, and Ehrman have gotten nothing but support for their efforts from the St. Johns community.

"I worked in Gresham for 20 years and it took 13 or 14 years of working with them to do what the St. Johns churches are ready to do right now."

Kimes thinks part of the reason St. Johns doesn't have enough services is because the city hasn't properly counted the neighborhood's homeless. He says he expects this year's numbers to show a jump. Proof, he says, that there's still a lot more that needs doing. And Gaudio agrees.

"There's nothing housing wise," says Gaudio. "There's food, and clothing, and hygiene (services), but there's no real (temporary) housing."

But that too is changing. Kimes says he and others, via the Church of North Portland, are currently working on creating a "full-fledged shelter network." AllOne has hired a coordinator to that end, and, according to Brewer, six St. Johns churches are working on the effort. And that might just make it a little easier for Gaudio and others in St. Johns to sleep through the night.

## Spring

By Brianna DeFaunt

Spring  
The flowers are in full bloom  
The air is crisp and fresh,  
Even the grass is greener for  
A moment's time.  
You can  
Hear the song birds singing  
Their beautiful lullabies  
in the trees.