

More shelter from the storm

Salvation Army Female Emergency Shelter prepares to expand permanent housing opportunities for women seeking refuge from the streets

BY SARAH HANSELL
STAFF WRITER

It's the middle of December and the temperatures are dwindling dangerously close to freezing. It's about midnight — the time the doors of the Roseland Theater open and the post-concert crowd emerges, wrapping scarves around their necks and shoving hats on their heads. Their excited chatter leaves steam in the air as they filter out of the theater in different directions, toward parked cars or to the corner of the sidewalk to hail a taxi, the promise of a roof and a warm bed awaiting them.

For Kate, huddled across the street in the doorway of St. Andre Bessette Catholic Church, this means she will finally be able to get to sleep. For her, however, there is no warm bed, just her wheelchair and a 4:30 a.m. wake-up call as the police officers make their rounds. Time to gather her things. And wait. The red doors of St. André's will open at 9 a.m. for the church to provide their daily breakfast. From there it's on to the next place to escape the cold, the Salvation Army Female Emergency Shelter (SAFES) where she spends the days. And the same thing the next day, and the next, and the next.

This was Kate's reality for four years — the time she spent sleeping in the doorway of St. André Bessette in her manual wheelchair, a knife tucked away in case someone threatened her, the lack of sleep making it hard to stay alert.

"It makes you more vulnerable because when you're tired you don't pay attention to what's going on around you," Kate said.

And for a woman sleeping on the streets of Portland, paying attention is key.

"Men feel like they can take advantage of us because we're out here," Kate said.

According to the Portland Housing Bureau's 2013 Point-in-Time Count, 38 percent of the city's homeless population were women, a 22 percent spike in women who are "literally" homeless — unsheltered or in emergency shelter — since 2011. Only 21 percent of the available beds in shelters, however, were designated for single women at that time.

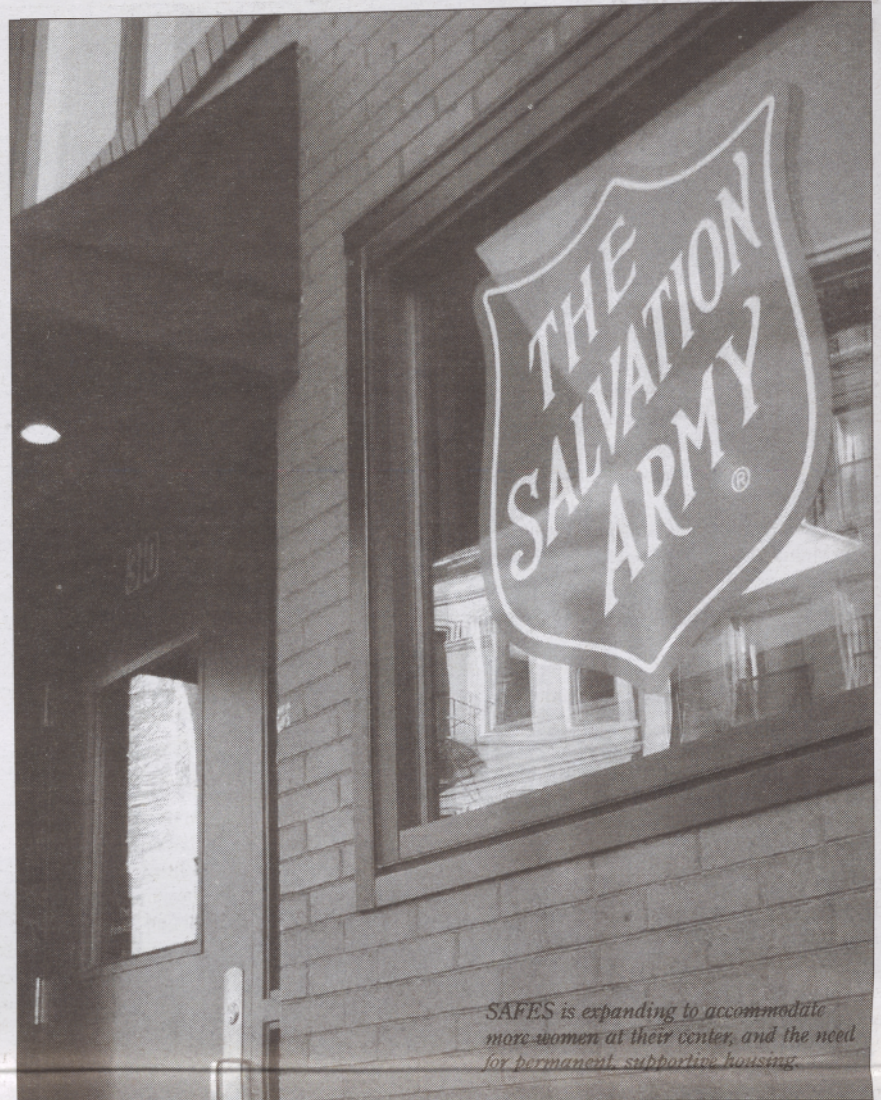
"You can clearly see that in actuality a homeless person is not necessarily an elderly man sitting on the corner of the street," SAFES Executive Director Bernadette Basilio said. "The definition of a homeless person completely has changed."

SAFES is working to provide for these homeless women, who are among the most vulnerable to violence on the streets. Operating out of a new and much larger building as of 2013, SAFES is now able to expand their emergency shelter options to 45 mats, rather than the previous 15. The winter shelter, which opened Nov. 1 and extends through April, is in addition to SAFES' regular night and day shelters.

And now, after nine months without permanent leadership, Basilio is seeing SAFES through the development of 42 new single-room occupancy apartments, which are scheduled to open by the end of the year. This new housing option will protect 42 more women from the cold and the dangers of the street.

And these dangers aren't lost on the women who face them.

"Safety is the biggest (concern), because men have to worry about safety, but we are more vulnerable than them," said Crystal, a



SAFES is expanding to accommodate more women at their center, and the need for permanent, supportive housing.

woman who used SAFES' services in the past and is now housed and works at SAFES as a resident assistant.

Crystal was on the streets living with addiction for five years. In those five years she found shelter under the the Vista Bridge, the Burnside Bridge, the Morrison Bridge, next to the I-405 off ramp, at the Park Blocks in front of a church and in the doorway of an old theater. But wherever she found herself laying her head at night, she made sure she wasn't alone. She always kept a companion close for safety.

Not all women, however, have this option. Sandra, who came directly to SAFES after being kicked out of her nephew's home,

isn't from Portland and didn't have a network in the city. So unlike Crystal and the many other women who seek safety in numbers, she had no companions for protection. As a survivor of child and sexual abuse, her fears of being forced to sleep outside were amplified. Luckily, she was never unsheltered.

"My constant fear throughout homelessness was, 'What am I going to do if I get kicked out of a shelter and I have to walk the streets all night?'" she said.

Some women who are alone and do find themselves on the streets at night feel they

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The new face of homeless veterans

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Tina McDowell runs Sgt. McDowell's Military Relief, a nonprofit started by her late brother-in-law that helps Portland-area veterans connect with social services and escape homelessness. Last fall she noticed an increase in the number of women seeking out her services. She used to get about one call a month from a female, but between August and September alone, eight female veterans reached out to her, looking for help getting off the streets and into housing.

This was no fluke. What McDowell is seeing is part of a national upward trend in

female veterans experiencing homelessness. According to a study released last year by Disabled American Veterans, women who are veterans are two to four times as likely to experience homelessness than women who are not veterans. While only 0.9 percent of homeless adults are women, 8 percent of homeless veterans are women — about 4,500 nationally. With more women enlisting in the military, more women are becoming homeless after returning to civilian life. According to the report, "African American women veterans, ages 18-29, who live in poverty, were shown to be particularly susceptible to becoming

homeless, with 36.3 percent experiencing homelessness compared to 11.9 percent of all other women veterans in poverty."

Nancy Sloan, the women's programs manager at the Portland VA, says many women join the military because they see it as a means to acquire a career, housing and stability. But when they return from deployment, she says, "they have trouble reintegrating and feeling like they're the same person that they were when they left." She says their friends and family have a hard time understanding what they saw. "That was a lot of trauma and experiences that many will never see in their lifetime," she says, "to come back and just pick up where they left off is next to impossible. On top of that trying to go to school, go back to mothering their

children, trying to find work, all of that is a huge, huge challenge."

McDowell says by the time women contact her, "They are so stressed out they can't focus on what to do next." It can be hard for many of them to get the services they need if they decided to wait until after they were discharged to speak up about sexual assault or trauma from combat, she says. "It's really important that the person filling out their claim is the right person." In most of the cases she's come across, the women were living out of their cars, in some cases with their children.

"Pride has a lot to do with it. They'd rather sleep in their car than in a shelter where there's no common law and it's hard to keep the males separate from the females," says McDowell.