

# COMFORT to a certain degree

As Multnomah County's first year-round homeless shelter prepares to open, service providers aim to help families become stable – but not too complacent

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Three weeks ago, Jake P., his wife, Christina, and their 8-month-old child became homeless.

One month ago, B.J. Coney, 39, chose to become homeless rather than continue to live with her husband, who she said verbally and physically abused their four children.

In mid-November, Jerri Menard, 44, and her 12-year-old daughter, Raven, became homeless after being evicted from their two-bedroom apartment, an apartment Jerri said she could no longer afford after she asked her abusive husband to leave.

These families became homeless for reasons that have become all too familiar in Portland: no-cause evictions. An inability to find a new home in a city with one of the country's lowest vacancy rates. A struggle to keep up with drastic rent increases.

But they have all found a temporary home – of sorts.

They sleep in a shelter operated by Human Solutions, a nonprofit that serves homeless families in Multnomah County. The shelter is a bare-bones operation; people sleep on mats that are slightly thicker than an inch. It opens at 3:30 in the afternoon. Lights-out is at 10. Residents wake by 6 in the morning, and leave by 7.

The shelter is low barrier, meaning residents are not required to be sober or clean. The only requirement is that residents either are part of a family with children or are in their third trimester of pregnancy.

Around 130 people stay at the shelter every night. Last year, shelter staff rarely saw such high numbers during the winter. This year, those numbers are average.

The shelter opened in November. But unlike the winter shelters of previous years, this shelter will not close in the spring. Once it relocates, by the end of February, it will be the first shelter in Multnomah County to be open year-round and during all hours of the day.

The shelter will move to Southeast Stark Street and 160th Avenue, in a building that once housed the Black Cauldron strip club. The new space opened Feb. 1, and Human Solutions' Daybreak program, which provides respite services during the day, has already moved into the building.

The new shelter will have semi-private sleeping spaces for 130 parents and children. It will have showers, laundry, lockers to store belongings, a commercial kitchen to cook and prepare food, a covered outdoor patio where kids can play, and space for social-services

agencies to operate satellite locations to meet with residents. There will be no time limit for how long a family can stay.

The significance of opening a year-round shelter in Multnomah County cannot be overstated. In the past, shelters have been regarded as the ugly duckling of homeless services: necessary during the winter, but not regarded as a solution to ending homelessness.

Andy Miller, Human Solutions' executive director, says the need to provide shelter for homeless families has become more urgent as that segment of the homeless population grows.

"With respect to families, the community has always supported the notion that no child should sleep outside," Miller said. "The shelter is really trying to immediately address the trauma that people and children experience when they experience homelessness."

The shelter will be an experiment in creating more robust services within a structure that has been defined by how stripped down it is. As more shelters open, they will look to Human Solutions' programming as a model, which, staff agree, must walk a fine line between helping families become stable and allowing them to become too complacent or too comfortable.

## 'The newly homeless'

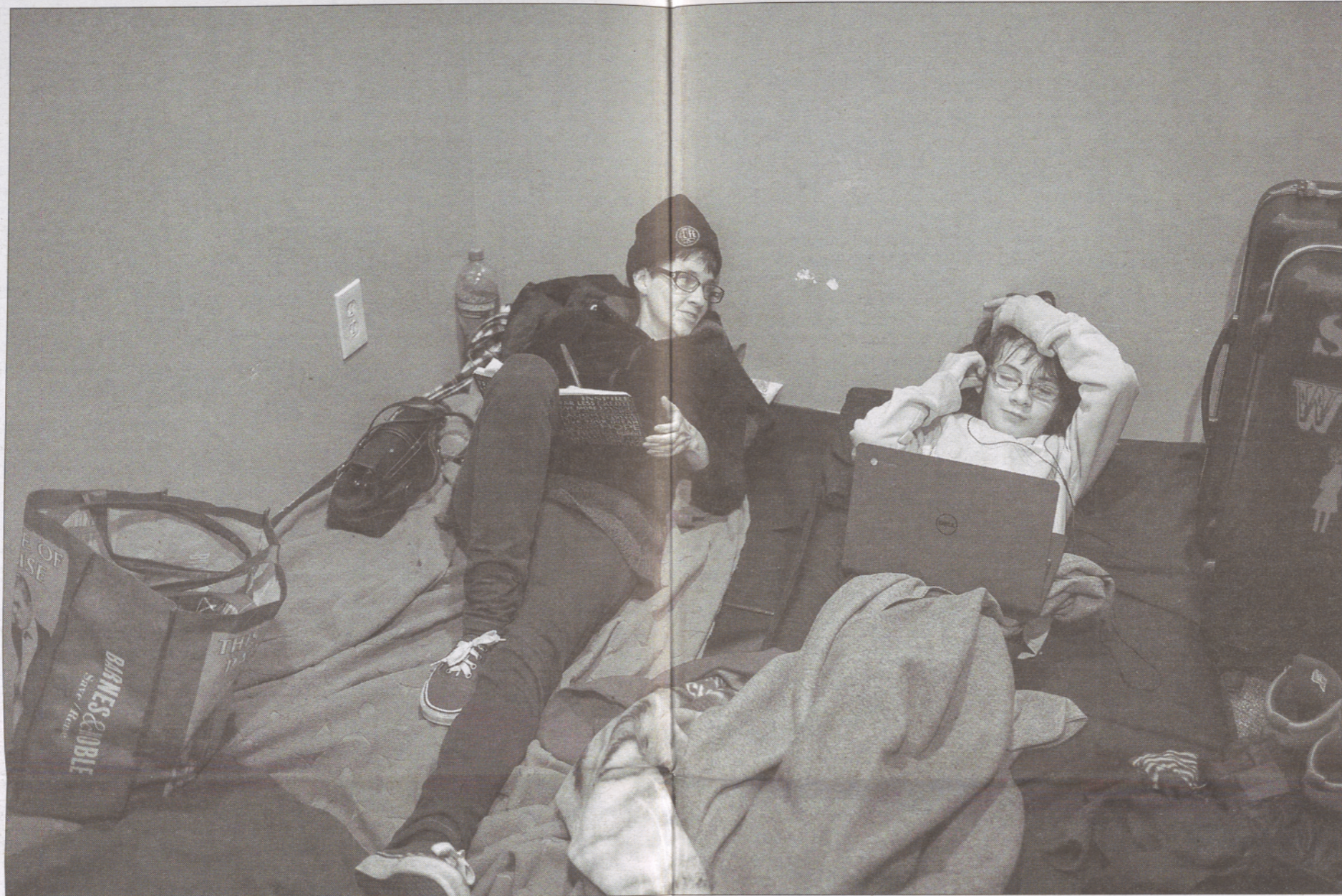
On Jan. 21, a Thursday, it is gray and cold. A cluster of people loiters near the entrance of the shelter, a nondescript one-story building across the street from a MAX stop on Southeast Burnside Street. Some shuffle back and forth and swing their arms to stay warm. A couple sit in folding chairs and snuggle against each other. Another couple pushes a baby stroller. A father chases his daughter around the parking lot.

Some people carry their possessions in garbage sacks, backpacks, hand carts or luggage bags. Kids carry games or puzzles.

There are two dozen adults and a half-dozen kids with nothing to do but wait for the shelter to open.

They enter through the back of the building. A short hallway leads to a large open space that includes a partially walled-off area – a former office cubicle now used as a children's play area. Twelve rooms run along one wall. Shelter staff assign two families to a room each week through a lottery system. None of the rooms has a door.

Every afternoon, shelter staff and residents set up large folding tables and chairs in a



Jerri Menard and her daughter, Raven, get settled in at Human Solution's family shelter. It will soon open as 24-hour, year-round service facility – a new model for Multnomah County.

PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

L-shape around the play area. Residents eat dinner there. After dinner, the tables and chairs are folded to make room to sleep on the floor.

On a recent Saturday afternoon, Jerri Menard is in the room assigned to her and her daughter. She and Raven lie next to each other on mats padded with blankets and pillows. Menard reads a book; Raven plays a game on a laptop.

Jake P., Christina and their baby are also assigned a room, down a short hallway and around a corner. It is quieter and more private than the other rooms, and the family often rests there before dinner.

B.J. Coney normally sits at a table with her three children. On this Saturday afternoon, she's playing Monopoly with her daughter. These three families are what Charles Hodge, Human Solutions' emergency services coordinator, calls "the newly homeless." He estimates that a third of the shelter's population falls into that category.

They're easy to pick out. They wear newer clothes. They store their possessions in luggage bags. They are worn and tired, but their faces aren't carved with the deep weariness of years spent being homeless.

Hodge said serving that population is the shelter's biggest challenge. Unlike people who have been homeless before or for a long time, they aren't familiar with services available to

them.

"These new folks are wide-eyed. Their bandwidth is incredibly limited, and they get overwhelmed really easily," Hodge said. "They want to know how do I get a bus pass? Where do I shower? Where can I get extra clothes, extra shoes? They know nothing. The learning curve is steep."

Jake P. agreed. "Most of these people know the ropes," he said. "We have to ask as we go. We're still getting used to it. That's the hardest part, just getting used to it."

Menard calls homelessness her "great awakening."

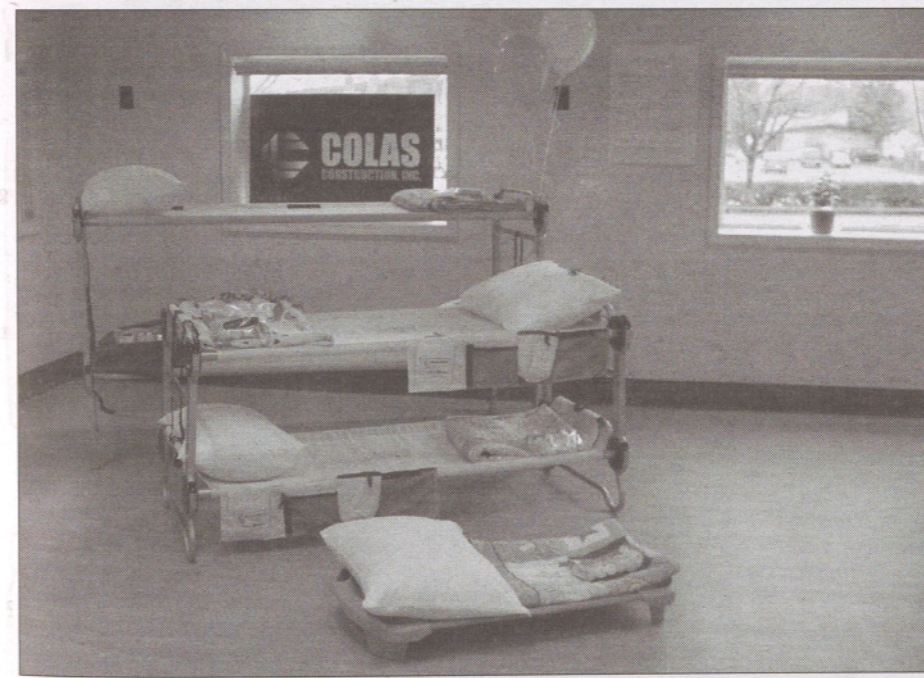
"Before, I was very much a homebody. I stayed in my house. I didn't reach out to a lot of people. One of the things that I think homelessness did for me was wake me up and make me get out," she said.

"When you become homeless, you do a lot of soul searching. Why did this happen to me? This doesn't seem fair. This doesn't seem right," she said.

She realized that "why" wasn't the appropriate question to ask.

"The question that I came up with and answered is, what did I not do? What were the things that I was not looking at, that I was not focusing on in my life? Maybe it was what I didn't do rather than what I did do."

The story of how Menard became homeless



Cots are displayed at the grand opening of Human Solutions' new family shelter, which begins operating this month. At the previous shelter, families have slept on the floor.

PHOTO BY ANGELA TAYLOR

is one of complacency that turned into catastrophe.

Last year, her husband of seven years started drinking heavily. He would shout at Raven and black out regularly. Menard asked

him to go into rehab; he refused. One night, Menard and Raven returned home from seeing a movie. Menard's husband was passed out in front of the couch. He lay in a weird, unnatural position. Menard thought he had

died. She asked him to leave, and he did in March 2015.

"Think about it, seeing your dad that way," Menard said.

They were able to stay in their two-bedroom apartment in Southeast Portland for nine months. Menard does not work, as a result of a spinal fusion, a surgical procedure that fuses together two or more vertebrae in the spine, which she had done when she was 15. She receives \$900 in Supplemental Security Income each month. Menard cobbled the \$720 in rent together with her SSI and money from a Department of Human Services program that helps victims of domestic violence make rental payments.

Menard's divorce became final last year. She is supposed to receive spousal support, but she said she has not received any payments. She asked her landlord if she could make partial payments and catch up once the support arrived, but she was turned down.

They were evicted Nov. 13, Raven's 12th birthday.

They spent the first weekend in a motel. Menard called her daughter's school counselor, who told Menard about the family shelter. Raven now goes to the Transitional School, a school designed for children who are homeless.

Many families try to establish a semblance of normalcy and routine, for the sake of their children if anything. Menard makes sure Raven gets a snack after school and does her homework, and that they have a chance to spend time together during the afternoon.

Most parents at the shelter spend the afternoon with their kids. They sit at the tables with them, talking, eating snacks, or playing card and board games.

Kids outnumber the adults two to one. The majority of the kids are toddlers or in elementary school. There are a handful of teenagers.

It is never quiet. People talk loudly. Kids scream. Much of the adults' time is taken up by keeping kids busy. Conversations are constantly interrupted, filling out paperwork is put on hold, and thoughts are derailed as adults tell the kids to settle down or be quiet or sit in the chair or get a snack or stop fighting with another kid.

Coney is often exhausted in the afternoon. Like other parents, she struggles with how to spend the day while the shelter is closed. Many go to a day program at a nearby church. Others go to Human Solutions' Daybreak program, where they can shower and do laundry. Coney likes to take her kids to the public library.

"They love it," she said. "They can play on the iPad, get on the Internet, read. I just go in the car and go to sleep."

She became homeless when she left her husband. He had verbally and physically abused her for years, she said, and gradually, he began behaving the same way toward their children. She knew it would get worse for her kids. "That's when I decided to leave," she said.

She said her kids are happy at the shelter. They have other kids they can play with. But she is overwhelmed.

"I'm doing a lot of things by myself," Coney said. "I've gotten more migraines than I usually do. It's not the shelter. It's the atmosphere."

Jake P. is tall, rail-thin and wears a baseball cap over his black hair. His beard partially obscures his sunken cheekbones.

"I have a hard time being around a lot of people at once; too many things going on around me," he said.

The family started staying at the shelter three days after becoming homeless in Eugene, after Jake's family kicked them out. Their days, he said, have been "really chaotic. Very anxiety filled."

"At times, we feel hopeless," he said. "At other times, we feel uplifted."

Like the other families, he and his wife focus on the well-being of their child.

"We just have to keep smiling because that little baby smiles, and we need him to be happy," Jake said.

Jake and Christina choose to be optimistic. "As tough as this is, it's a blessing," he said.

"We could say this sucks or that sucks or this is kind of hectic, but it's all a blessing because the alternative would be much worse."

## Commotion at the shelter

The shelter rents two PODS storage containers, which sit in the parking lot, for residents to store most of their possessions. Every evening around 5:45 p.m., the container is opened for people to retrieve their bedding for the night. Shelter staff yell, "Pods! Pods, pods, pods," and a handful of people trickle outside and use a single flashlight to see inside the container.

The system has nearly gotten out of control. The containers are overflowing with plastic tubs and garbage bags. Once the shelter moves to its new location, each three-person family will be assigned a 26-gallon plastic tub; larger families will receive more tubs. Many people will have to discard some of their things. Other people, like Menard, can afford to rent storage units.

Dinner starts around 7 p.m. People trickle into the shelter throughout the afternoon, and at least 80 people have arrived by dinnertime. There is no commercial kitchen at the shelter; volunteers cook the food at their homes or churches and bring the meals to the families.

The energy level ramps up. People talk more loudly, children run around faster. People lead their children to where a line forms. These times of transition, when people aren't settled down, are when fights are most likely to start.

"These fights just erupt," Menard said, snapping her fingers, "and you've got to try and stay out of them."

As people line up for dinner, two women scream at each other. People stand back in a circle. Robert Anthony, the shelter's evening manager, walks up to the group. The altercation is over cutting in line. Anthony defuses the argument, asking a woman to "please, please, instead of cutting in line, go to the back of the line."

Anthony, whose every action and word have Zen-like attributes, takes fights like this in stride.

"They have been in a desperate situation for a long period of time," he said. "Your ability to communicate is diminished. When you're thinking about where you're going to rest at night, where you're going to get extra clothes, where you're going to get your next meal, that other stuff goes out the window. We hope that bandwidth will open up eventually."

The line re-forms and people calm down. Volunteers from the St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Church serve chicken Alfredo, salad,