

RURAL HOUSING, from page 11

best!" Bennett exclaimed. "And in large print."

"I'm not saying you're old," Witte joked. "I know you love crossword puzzles."

As soon as she is done speaking with Bennett, there is another person seeking Witte's attention; there is hardly ever any let up.

"Are you feeling OK?" Witte asked a woman, who is pregnant. "Is the baby moving around a lot? Just lie down and relax." She turns to a man, asks if he signed up for a bus pass. A woman walks in, who is late for an appointment with Witte. Witte does not mind; she never seems to. "How are you?" she asks. "You're never too late! You're early today."

Then a man, who has never been to the Back Door Café before and has never met Witte, walks up to her.

"I was told you guys can help with identification," the man said.

"Yes," Witte replied. "Tell me, do you have a birth certificate?"

"Yes," the man said. "But it's not on me. It's in my storage unit. It's got a red lock on it."

"Oh, I hate when that happens," Witte said. She explains that to have state-issued identification in Oregon, a person must supply their birth certificate.

"I'm trying to get a job to get (the lock) off," the man said. He said he had just gotten out of jail, that the lock had been put on while he was incarcerated.

"I wish they'd let you get your papers out of there and just put it back on. You know what I mean?" Witte said. "How do you get a job without your ID?"

She pauses for a moment. "OK, let's think about this."

She asks if his current ID is expired. It is not, he tells her. Then she asks if he has a phone. He doesn't. She tells him to borrow one to call the DMV to ask if he can get a replacement ID and how much it would cost. "What I might do is meet you there tomorrow and we can walk up, pay for it, and get it for you." After he makes the phone call, she tells him, "come find me."

The man's next words are unexpected: he introduces himself. As he said his name, he sounds relieved, more relaxed, confident.

"Thank you so much," he said.

"One way or another, we'll figure something out," Witte said.

reimbursement	71.50	
ID	44.50	
car repair		
utility assistance	50	
rent assistance	100	
transport fees	85	
rent assistance	1000	
gas medical	4700	
water bill	25.50	
rent assistance	1000	
2500 - gas voucher	2500	
Electricity Pacific Power		
Greyhound Idaho - MetroPCS	50	
phone employment	300	

The lists of expenses tallied from the Back Door Café's Compassionate Care fund for people in need of small amounts of money for essential needs.

As soon as she finishes speaking with him, she turns to another man, who said he needs help buying gas. Witte routes him to Compassionate Care.

Another man tells Witte he lost his library card, and the replacement fee is 50 cents.

"Oh, we can solve that," Witte said.

"All I need is 50 cents," the man said.

"I can get you 50 cents," Witte assured him.

WITTE, FROM HER EXPERIENCES with the people she has met and helped, has become one of the strongest advocates for low-barrier services in Central Oregon.

She said many of the people who come to the Café have active warrants out for their arrest, and that there is a high degree of mental health challenges and substance abuse among Central Oregon's homeless community.

That means, without low-barrier services, many of the region's homeless people are unable to receive the range of services they need to end their homelessness. In the tri-county, Central Oregon region there are an estimated 1,455 people experiencing

homelessness, according to the Point-in-Time count conducted last year, but the true number is thought to be much higher.

In the case of camping, she said, "we have no safe places for people to camp. So people are camping on (Bureau of Land Management) land. There are messes, because how do you get your trash out? So we're not setting up infrastructure for folks, and we really do need that," Witte continued. "There's just a lot of things that we're not looking at."

She attributes the reluctance to create low-barrier services to assumptions people make about the homeless community and the fear those assumptions generate.

"They're always being judged," she said. "People need to be treated with dignity and worth."

Last winter, Witte spearheaded the creation of a low-barrier shelter at Bend Church for homeless women, their children and their pets during the winter.

It was called the Back Door Women's shelter and provided shelter, at night, for up to 20 women. Since the shelter was low-barrier, the only requirement was that women not bring in drugs and no drugs to the shelter.

Witte had an agreement with Bend Cab, to have tax drivers pick up women escaping

domestic violence situations and bring them to the shelter. An overnight manager was trained in de-escalation tactics, CPR, and basic first aid. Witte provided case management.

The women ate dinner together, were able to shower, and Witte made a lot of activities available to them - she brought in a yoga teacher. They had movie nights together. The women took a knitting class. "It was awesome," Witte said.

The women slept in Bend Church's gym. In the morning, they were given breakfast, then had to leave for the day.

The shelter was open for three and a half months, closing once winter ended. In that time, the shelter served 92 homeless women and children. Only one person had to be banned for disruptive behavior.

Witte said the shelter's existence made a demonstrable difference. "Women were not having to sleep in storage units," Witte said. "They weren't having to trade a safe place to sleep for sex."

The shelter did not reopen this previous winter. Bend Church needed the space for other uses. Throughout last summer, Witte approached dozens of churches throughout Bend. They also refused for various reasons: they could not have sex offenders on site, due to preschools located at the church; there was not enough space for a shelter; in other cases, the congregation felt uncomfortable at the thought of having a homeless shelter at their church.

She has not stopped working with churches and other organizations to find a new space for the shelter, which she hopes will open this coming winter. She is also trying to get a dental van, which would provide cleanings, X-rays, and extractions, to come to Bend Church, as the Mosaic Medical van does. And, she's working with churches, social service agencies, and local businesses to increase and stabilize the Back Door Café's funding.

With all the work that she does, Witte is always reminding herself to maintain boundaries so she can maintain a personal life and not burn out. "How do you love someone and also be able to hold boundaries?" she constantly asks herself.

She never wants to become immune to empathizing with the pain of people's homelessness.

"I don't ever want to stop crying over someone's pain. That means I've gotten too cold to it."

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