



PHOTOS BY EMILY GREEN

Right, Alan Evans at Helping Hands Seaside office. Evans founded Helping Hands after spending 25 years of his life on the streets. Today it operates 11 facilities with 190 beds, including the Tillamook facility, above.

Shelter: Conditions definitely apply

Clients at Helping Hands must follow strict sobriety and programming requirements in exchange for a roof over their heads. It's working.

BY EMILY GREEN
SENIOR STAFF REPORTER

Residents in Oregon's coastal towns are willing to help people in their communities who have fallen on hard times. But they expect those seeking services to meet them halfway – and many are weary of enabling an increasingly visible homeless population that's perceived as transient and criminal, according to social service providers Street Roots interviewed in Astoria, Seaside, Tillamook, Lincoln City and Coos Bay.

"A lot of people want to help homeless people who just had unfortunate circumstances that landed them at our door," said Raven Brown, development director at Helping Hands, which operates shelter programs in three coastal counties. "They don't want to help the traveling, transient people that are destructive to property and leave debris behind and cause problems in our community."

Teaching potential donors that not all unsheltered people fall into that latter category can be a challenge, but on the coast, it's necessary for nonprofits trying to secure funding.

Given local attitudes and limited area resources, it should be no surprise that most well-funded charities that assist homeless people on the coast require that they remain clean and sober and work toward self-sufficiency.

While this reality can leave some with mental health and substance abuse issues outdoors, the success these programs have with those who are eligible begs notice.

Remarkably, despite shoestring budgets and skeleton crews, these programs see the

Housing Rural Oregon

vast majority of graduates maintain their own housing for years after they graduate.

Helping Hands Reentry Outreach Centers ("reentry" is used to describe a person's reentry to society from homelessness rather than from prison) is known as the primary provider of shelter in the coast's northern counties.

It operates four emergency shelters anyone can access for up to four days, as long as they aren't a sex offender and are not intoxicated. This is to protect children who may be onsite.

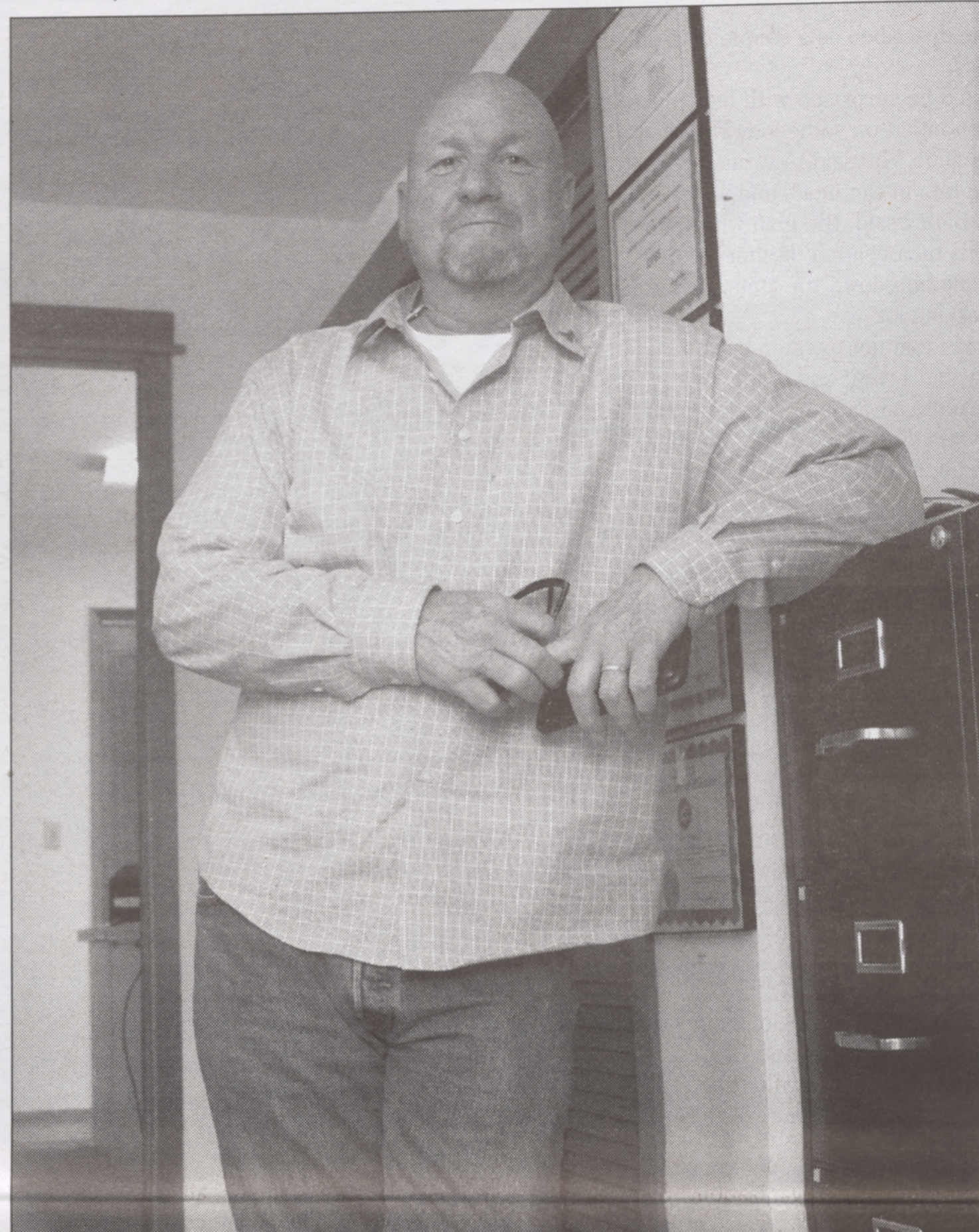
After four days, however, if an individual cannot commit to the Helping Hands' strict sobriety and programming requirements, and pass a drug and alcohol test, they must leave.

Sixty percent of the people who access the emergency shelters agree to stay and work the program. Fifteen percent secure another roof over their head before the four-day time limit is up.

Of those who stay, 90 percent successfully graduate, explained Brown, "and three years later, 80 percent of women and 75 percent of men are still independently sustaining housing."

Helping Hands has been able to achieve this high rate of success at a cost of just \$13 to \$15 per person per day.

Its founder, Alan Evans, said this is possible because Helping Hands survives on foundational grants and donations so it can be somewhat unconventional in how it administers assistance.



"Federal dollars have too many strings attached," said Evans. "We've been looking at it from the bottom up rather than the top down from the very beginning, and we will not change that. We are very good at what we do, and we will not limit that service for a dollar."

Before he founded Helping Hands, which began as Thugz off Drugz in 2004, Evans was homeless and addicted to methamphetamine.

"I lived on the streets from 13 until 38," he said from the swivel chair behind his desk at Helping Hands' Seaside office. "I am a survivor. I'm a sexual abuse survivor. I'm a physical abuse survivor as a child. I've been in and out of the system, in and out of the penitentiary. I'm the panhandler – I'm the aggressive guy on the corner."

He said social workers he crossed paths with during those years never saw that he was broken on the inside. He finally got off the streets when a police officer who arrested him decided to take a chance on him and found a home where he could stay while he got on his feet. He got a job, saved his money and opened an eight-bed shelter in Seaside. Now his program has 11 facilities and 190 beds across Clatsop, Lincoln, Yamhill and Tillamook counties.

He's based his programming on pinpointing and fixing each individual's unique challenges, rather than trying to squeeze everyone into a one-size-fits-all box. The core of the program is addressing a person's underlying trauma.

The average stay in one of Helping Hands' re-entry programs is 90 days, but those with tougher cases stay up to a year.

Participants must pass random drug

tests, attend classes they've been assigned, and they must complete 10 volunteer hours per week in the community, in one of Helping Hands' thrift stores, or in the shelter where they live.

In Tillamook, an old naval command center has served as Helping Hands emergency shelter and reentry program for the county since 2015.

In April, Street Roots visited the large, two-story shelter that sits between the base of the Cascade Range and Tillamook's Air Museum. It was the site manager's 57th birthday the day we visited.

"They're probably making me a cake that I can't eat because I'm diabetic," said Gary Carlson.

He said Helping Hands came to him when his drinking habit landed him in Astoria's hospital six years ago. He said he was drinking himself to death, but the program gave him a reason to live.

"I haven't touched a drop of liquor in six years. Basically it gives me purpose, helping others so they don't fall in the same trap I did," he said.

Across its programming and facilities, Helping Hands has only three full-time and six part-time staff. It gets by with the help of 200 active volunteers who teach classes, cook meals and counsel, and house managers such as Carlson, who are all graduates of the program themselves and work for free room and board plus a \$500

See SHELTER, page 11