

Last Summer, the Clackamas Service Center was nearly destroyed by fire. Today, the center has reopened with a new vision and fresh approach to helping the neighborhood.



From the ashes

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Necessity is the mother of invention, as the saying goes. For the Clackamas Service Center, which provides low-income and homeless services, necessity arrived unwelcome last year in the form of an early morning fire that gutted its Southeast Portland facility.

Staff rebounded from the July 2017 fire as quickly as possible. They worked out of a construction trailer for a year, and a large, temporary tent was set up, along with a food truck, so that warm meals could be served. But the center's main building remained closed for more than a year, and many services had to be suspended.

In a lot of ways, the fire became a blessing in disguise. The Clackamas Service Center's staff used the year for strategic thinking and planning about how the agency operated and what needed to change to better serve their clients. As a result, many aspects of the agency have changed, and there are now plans for creating new programs that not only help the agency's homeless clients survive the day-to-day challenges of being homeless, but also help them toward eventually moving back into their own home.

"We re-envisioned everything," executive director Debra Mason said. "It sounds like a really weird thing to say, but it was almost what we needed. I know that our members suffered and I'm not happy about that. But it was a massive luxury to be able to just create the space the way we wanted to and make the changes."

The Clackamas Service Center is the only social service agency in Southeast Portland near Southeast 82nd Avenue and the Springwater Corridor area, a place where hundreds of homeless people camp. JOIN, the outreach and housing agency, is five miles to the north, and My Father's House, a



Richard Pruiett, 48, has been homeless on and off for much of his life. He said he walks three miles from where he camps to get to the Clackamas Service Center. At top, Pruiett stands in front of the newly renovated center.

PHOTOS BY AMANDA WALDROUPE

Gresham-based agency, is eight miles to the east.

"It's a huge resource desert out here," said center Program Director Michael Boldt. "And there's really not much shelter out here at all."

The Clackamas Service Center is often the only agency that its homeless clients — many of whom camp along the Springwater Corridor — can rely on for warm meals, showers, clothing and other services.

In any given month, the center serves close to 700 people. The agency's clients make up a slightly different demographic than the social-service agencies in central Portland: many are Russian or Asian immigrants, and a significant proportion are not homeless, but simply deeply impoverished.

Mason and her staff re-envisioned the Clackamas Service Center with an eye toward providing its clients more autonomy, more dignity and a sense of peace from the daily chaos of their lives.

The center historically was a day center, a place where people could come and spend any length of time. Mason said that is no

longer allowed. Some clients, she and Boldt said, would become bored and agitated. Fights and arguments would break out. "It was an unhealthy environment," Boldt said.

Physically, the Clackamas Service Center has undergone a dramatic facelift.

The former church has fresh coats of paint inside and out, new flooring, office space for staff, and a new commercial kitchen with appliances.

A desk near the entrance was installed, so clients coming into the center's day space are now greeted by staff and checked in. Previously, Mason said, people came and went as they pleased, which made it difficult for staff to keep track of who was in the space and when.

A ramp was built at the front of the people, so people using wheelchairs and walkers can now enter through the front entrance. Previously, people used a ramp in the back to enter through the back door, which Mason said added to an atmosphere of chaos. "It was just a disaster," she said. "Now, everyone comes through the front."

Some of the biggest changes concern how the center helps its homeless clients access

food, both through the meals the agency serves on site and through its food pantry.

Meals are served six days a week, up from four days a week. Before the fire, the Clackamas Service Center's kitchen was too small to cook meals. Instead, volunteers would bring in meals that had already been cooked and prepared. People would line up with paper plates and cutlery, serve themselves, sit down and, if they wanted seconds, return to the counter.

The new kitchen is larger, with commercial appliances and a dishwasher. Meals are now cooked on site, and because the kitchen now has a dishwasher, real plates and silverware are used instead of paper plates and cups.

Clients are served by volunteers who deliver food from the kitchen to seven round tables set up in the day space. It's more café than soup kitchen.

The general atmosphere during mealtimes was chaotic, and, depending on how much food volunteers brought, could run out. "We would have to scramble to make something

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