

# Simonka Place numbers contradict homeless counts

By ERIC A. HOWALD  
Of the Keizertimes

When Dianna arrived at the doorstep of Keizer's Simonka Place last October, she simply stood outside the shelter and cried for a while.

It took most all of her resolve to actually open the door.

"I was at my lowest of lows. I never thought I would be out of a job, that I would be at a homeless shelter. It was that fear, that pride," Dianna said. The *Keizertimes* is not using her last name to protect her privacy.

Dianna spent four decades as a certified nursing assistant before her own mental health issues, including bipolar depression, finally cost her the career in early 2015.

"I had enough to keep my apartment through April, then I was living with a friend," she said.

She didn't know what to expect as she entered Simonka Place, which is operated by Salem's United Gospel Mission (UGM), but the people she met there are slowly and surely helping her back toward independence.

She said a welcoming intake interview, a case manager "so full of energy and laughter" that it put her at ease, and a newfound religious faith have all been part of her recovery.

She was set up with a spot in Simonka's dayroom with about 10 other residents before getting moved to a less dense area after a surgery in November.

"They saved my bed for me and I didn't expect that," Dianna said. "Even the other residents are great. When someone is sick or having trouble, we do our best to take care of each other."

She's now working with an attorney to begin receiving Social Security benefits.

"I'm so much more peaceful and calm, they've helped me with so much, right down to helping me get new glasses through the Lion's Club," Dianna said.

While Dianna appears to be on a path to success, her story is just one of many residents at Simonka Place could tell. And, unfortunately, the numbers don't seem to be decreasing.

**A problem of scale**  
At a meeting of the Mid-Willamette Homelessness Initiative in June, Jeanine Knight, director of UGM's women's ministries, took issue with the purported headcount of the area's homeless.

"They were saying the total number in Marion and Polk counties was somewhere in the range of 600 to 800," Knight said. "Serving primarily women and children, I'm seeing those numbers, and we're a third the size of the men's ministry in Salem. It's hard to get firm numbers, but the number they were discussing seems low."

Since September 2015, Simonka Place has provided services to nearly 700 unique visitors (584 women and 109 children). That's an unduplicated headcount and doesn't include people returning to Simonka Place repeatedly. Simonka Place has about 90 beds and averages about 10 residents a night sleeping on the floor.

While Knight is loathe to turn away those in need of assistance, the sheer numbers of people needing services like those Simonka Place offers has prompted a closing of ranks.

"Right now, we are trying to limit what we do to just Marion and Polk counties. It doesn't mean we'll deny someone a bed for the night, but if they aren't local and can't com-

mit to a recovery program, we're really just warehousing them," she said.

On a recent trip to Portland to look at the services available there, Knight was shocked to find that women in the state's largest metropolitan area don't have a facility offering the same types of services.

"There are places for those who are dealing with addictions – some type of behavior that has taken control of their lives – but what do you do if you're a woman who has lost your job, or your relationship ended, you've gone through whatever savings you've had and you're not used to being on the streets?"

Unlike straightforward addiction treatment programs, Knight said Simonka Place attempts to address its residents' most basic needs and then ask the question, "Are you ready to commit to ending your homelessness?"

"If they can, we help them – and there is no ticking clock. If they can continue to make progress, then we will continue to work with them," Knight said.

**Not an echo, a reverberation**

Since joining the UGM staff a decade ago, Knight said she has come to view homelessness in a new light.

"There's lots of stereotypes of the homeless, but I've come to see them as people who have trauma and are trying to figure out how to survive," she said.

Knight said the case managers at Simonka Place are frequently able to identify addiction, mental health, domestic

violence and physical disability issues in residents' pasts. However, unlike an echo that would diminish over time, the inner battles the residents are waging against themselves are as real as the day the first volley was fired.

"For a woman who has had an abortion, the pain of that is just as real 20 years later as it was the day it happened," she said. "The same goes for a woman who had had to give a child up for adoption or lost a child to social services. It leaves them wondering how to stop the cycle, and if it ever will."

In this regard, one aspect of the area's homeless counts causes Knight to bristle – the actual questionnaire respondents fill out. The questions can be very specific and request details of the circumstances by which the respondent became homeless. The goal is to help identify the root causes of homelessness, but Knight has come to believe there is an unintended side effect.

"If I have to write that my husband of eight years became physically abusive and I had to flee, I have to relive all of it in detail. Even if I don't write it down, it's happening," she said. "If I was homeless, I would be retraumatized by the questionnaire."

There is also a fine line between portraying residents as victims and the deep level of empathy Knight wants to achieve at Simonka Place.

"The reality is that probably 80 percent of women at Simonka have been victims of abuse in the past and it's still affecting their present," she said. "But, if we walked a mile in their shoes,

we probably would have made a lot of the same choices. Drugs and alcohol are ways to make the hurt stop, even if it's temporary."

Instead of focusing solely on the tools to reduce addictions, Knight said Simonka Place's most successful programs start with residents being able to safely tell their stories, which can take months and is part of the reason there is no limit on how long a resident can stay.

"There is hope and healing and, when you can see that process through, it's wonderful," she said.

**Money matters**

While emotional recovery is a top priority, Simonka Place case managers place a heavy emphasis on money management.

"If residents have any kind of income, they are put on a budget. That seems like a logical thing, but it can be a big deal for someone who has never lived on a budget before," Knight said.

Residents meet with case managers to examine finances with an eye toward debt reduction and saving. At the end of the day, residents will still have total control of their money, but case managers will check in with banks to determine if the balances match the projections from the budget.

"We can supply them with housing, toiletries, clothing and water, but they need to figure out how the money they receive can be used to support them," Knight said. "We try to be very kind, but it is a firm policy."

It includes counseling and

training on how to manage money after residents "graduate" from Simonka's program. At a meeting of the Homelessness Initiative in last week, members of the task force heard from local property managers on the issue of affordable housing who said that failure to budget was the most common reason residents of low-income housing fail to thrive.

Knight said it often means having some basic conversations.

"If we have a resident who gets into an apartment and they want to throw a party that costs them \$200-\$300, there's a good chance it's going to affect their ability to pay rent the next month. And the landlord isn't going to give them a pass because he liked the music," Knight said.

While that might seem like a lavish expenditure, having conversations about going out to eat are just as frequent. At Simonka Place, the case managers also try to include residents and their children with the hope of breaking the cycle for future generations.

"It teaches them that money comes from somewhere," Knight said. "Instead of going out to eat, we might help them make a better choice, like buying a pie at a grocery store and sharing it at a park. It's still a treat, but not as expensive."

The methods also appear to be working, about 150 former residents have graduated into living spaces of their own in recent years. Only a handful have later returned to Simonka Place, and Knight said they are typically the individuals suffering from the most severe mental health issues.

**Empower now or enable later**

While the conversation about homelessness is continuing on a grander scale in the community, Knight said raising awareness of how the community supports the area's homeless population is still needed.

"We don't want to increase the number of homeless people in our cities, but directly and indirectly, homelessness is supported by our community," she said.

Volunteer efforts and social service organizations like UGM play a large role in addressing the problem, but there are also costs hidden in other tax-funded budgets, like police enforcement for trespassing violations and the resulting court costs.

Knight said UGM is fortunate to operating in a supportive Salem-Keizer community, but that those interested in doing more are always welcome at Simonka Place, and pre-arranged tours are available.

"It is often during a tour that someone clearly sees where they can make a difference," Knight said.

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