

WARM,

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I'm given a tour of the facility which is mostly open space and a few rooms off the main floor where supplies, donated items and the bags of visitors are kept. There's also a common area where visitors can eat, drink and keep company.

There will be a full orientation at 7:30 p.m. with the other people on my shift, but I get enough to know the lay of the land and then help unpack some of the evening's supplies.

Shortly before we start checking people in, a member of the community pulls up in a truck with food and five still-in-the-box, cold-weather sleeping bags. Organizers accept the sleeping bags, but decline the food. The ODE Warming Center hours have been set up so that homeless individuals can get a meal at Union Gospel Mission and then walk over to one of two warming centers, the other is located at an old car dealership a few blocks away.

As the doors open, I am posted at the bag check-in station. Visitors to the center are only supposed to have a small, transparent bag of personal belongings at their sleeping

space. Everything else — including sleeping bags, blankets and pillows — gets put in drawstring trash bags and labeled with a name and number for pick-up when the warming center closes in the morning.

I'm told by a volunteer who worked the night before that we should ask if they were here the previous night because they may have a bag with a blanket already stored at the site. If not, they get a new one. The wool blankets we dole out work fine indoors, but fare poorly in the elements.

I work my way through the first couple of visitors and feel as though I need to be more welcoming. I start trying to initiate something more like a conversation and immediately shove my foot halfway down my throat.

I ask one visitor as he puts his backpack in a trash bag if he has everything he needs for the night. "Not a dang thing," he responds with disbelief at my out-of-touch question.

I try again with the next visitor as I collect his belongings. "How are you doing?" He was checking into a warming shelter, and if I'd given it a second's thought I would have nixed that question, too.

By the fourth or fifth try, I finally settle on, "How are you

holding up tonight?" Some visitors barely respond while others engage me in small talk. A couple thank me for taking the time to volunteer, which makes me feel like a fraud. To my mind, four hours is such a small sacrifice to make in the face of a mounting problem throughout the area.

All the while, I'm having to enforce the rules about what is allowed in the sleeping area. Small transparent bags, nothing else but the clothes on your back. Make sure you have your cell phones, cigarettes, and medication if you need them close. I've become the TSA agent of the down-and-out.

Regardless of how it makes me feel to be an enforcer, the rules are in place for a reason. Keeping personal belongings in a secure area means no one will be tempted to rummage through another person's stuff, which reduces conflict and the need to push anyone back out onto the street on a frigid night.

Somewhere around this time, I remember what Cyndi told us right before we opened

the doors. "We're here tonight so someone isn't freezing to death on the street." Within that context, asking someone to surrender all their worldly possessions in return for a night of shelter is enough of a prod that I keep going.

About an hour into my shift, intake slows to a trickle.

Until the lights shut off at 10 p.m., I spend the time visiting with fellow volunteers and some of the night's visitors. Several of the volunteers are looking for ways they can get involved during the rest of the week, either through donations or additional shifts, while visitors seem more keen on just finding a friendly ear. Mostly, however, they keep to themselves. Not long after the lights dim, I realize that the primary myth of the warming center is that it's not what anyone with regular access to a central heating system would consider warm.

The front door has been held open by the line of visitors for the better part of the night and the temperature seems to drop several degrees as people stop moving around and settle in. It's a good bit warmer than the outside temperature of 33 degrees, but its

closer to the times when my family has awoken to something having gone wrong with our furnace and the temperature inside is somewhere between 55 and 63 degrees.

On top of that, most of our visitors have only a thin sleeping pad and a blanket to ward off the chill. They're also trying to sleep in a cavernous room where any warm air is rising well above them. Those days my family has endured without indoor heating were spent with blankets piled atop us at night, and sometimes it didn't feel like enough.

By the time my shift ends at 11:30 p.m., I've put my jacket back on and I'm fighting the urge to put up the hood on my sweatshirt. I bathe in warm air from my car's heater the second it warms up to an acceptable temperature and then take a steaming shower to finish the job before falling into bed.

The temptation with stories like these is always to wrap them up with a tidy bow. A signifier that things are rough, but there are good people trying to make a difference. That is true, but it's also true that the need for services like warming shelters isn't going away. We can't wish them into oblivion, and someone is always going to be needed to collect personal belongings as our area's homeless residents check-in at shelters and warming centers. Anyone

who can make it through such a task without feeling a twinge of shame at their indulgences is tougher than me.

At the same time, local government leaders have been collaborating on a task force for the past year trying to figure out a better approach to tackling the problems of homelessness. The task force stops meeting in February and concrete plans for the way forward are still somewhat sketchy beyond endorsing the work of some nonprofit groups dealing with the issue in their own ways.

The worst possible outcome is to end up yet with another plan/study/pamphlet of services that sits on a shelf for the next decade and collects dust while waiting for funding that never materializes.

The warming centers may prevent someone from freezing to death on the streets, but it's a far cry from restoring anyone's dignity. It's incumbent upon all of us to find a better way to do both.

As of press time, Wednesday, Jan. 4, volunteers are still needed for the remaining warming center shifts. Visit www.muwcaa.org to sign up. The warming centers can also use donations of Clorox wipes, large black garbage bags with drawstrings, thick masking tape, powdered creamer, sugar, bouillon, and the following clothing items in adult sizes: warm coats, gloves, knit caps, socks, jeans and sweatshirts.

"I've become the TSA agent of the down-and-out."

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PARKS,

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at 5:45 p.m. at the Keizer Civic Center.

The parks board has spent the better part of eight months developing and honing the survey that asks residents about their park priorities and whether they would support a fee to create a dedicated parks fund.

Parks board members will present the survey and a powerpoint presentation to the council and answer questions from the public and council at the meeting. Fee options in the survey range from no fee to \$8 per month.

The theme of the campaign is "Maintain, Match and Move Forward."

Keizer's 19 parks, which include 240 acres of the city, are in a funding crisis. Without additional funds, some amenities are likely to be closed or removed as they reach the end of their lifecycle. Even things like regular mowing and maintenance could suffer.

The city has been making do with two full-time parks employees and a few seasonal employees for the past several years, but the addition of

more park spaces and amenities is stretching resources thin.

The "Match" portion of the campaign refers to system development charges (SDCs) collected by the city when new residential construction begins in Keizer. The city has nearly \$800,000 in SDCs already collected, but those funds can only be used for 13.6 percent of any new project. For example, if the city wanted to build a new \$100,000 indoor sports facility, only \$13,600 of SDC money could be used to fund the project. The city would have to come up with another \$86,400 from other sources. To spend down the entire \$800,000 in already-collected SDCs, Keizer would need to come up with \$6.1 million.

Limits on how much SDC money can be spent on any given project are set by the state.

"Moving Forward" refers to the city's ability to act upon a parks master plan that was crafted with resident input almost a decade ago. While some projects on the list have come to fruition — primarily through grants and donated material and labor — many more are still waiting for funds to become available.

The parks survey can be completed online, visit www.keizer.org and click on the link at the top of the page. There is also the option of printing dead-tree copies and returning them to the Keizer Civic Center. Surveys are being included with utility bills in December and January.

10 Most Wanted

- Soup
- Pasta
- Fruit
- Cereal
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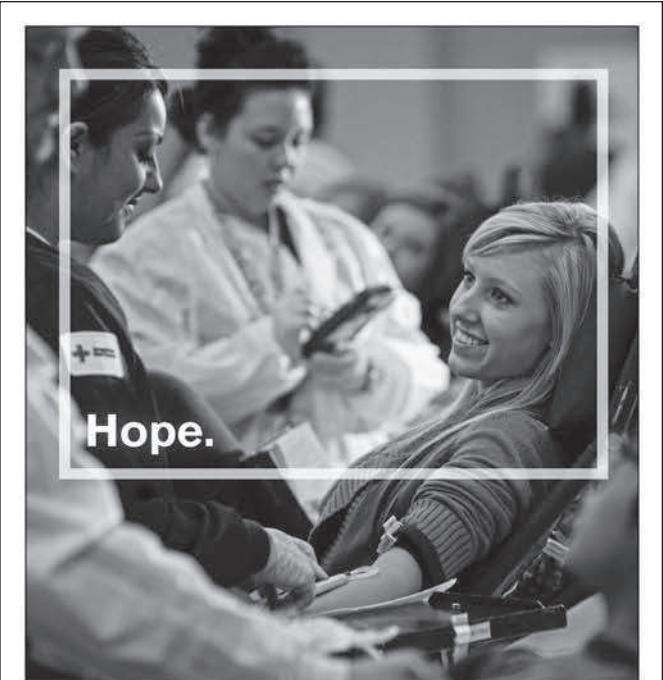
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