

Homeless: A shift of a few degrees can change everything

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the homeless. For groups and individuals that have stepped forward in the last two years to try to answer the questions, this winter is a testing ground. For others, it is an opportunity to reopen old inquiries and evaluate how much more needs to be done.

What's the game plan?

In early October, a woman who works with the local homeless and local businesses asked the Astoria City Council to come up with a strategy for addressing homelessness.

She could see both sides of the debate. Business owners are tired of the homeless sleeping, urinating and defecating in their doorways, leaving litter behind, asking passers-by for money. On the other hand, there are people who truly need help.

"So I ask you guys: 'What's the game plan?'" she said.

That same night, just down the sidewalk from City Hall, two men set up sleeping bags in the sheltered alcoves of the dilapidated Waldorf Hotel. They had been camping there for days.

Several weeks later, tall metal fencing was bolted across the front of these alcoves and Astoria Mayor Arline LaMear began to resurrect a city task force to look at local issues around homelessness.

A similar task force, formed in 2015, prompted valuable and open conversations between mental health and social services, religious groups, businesses and law enforcement about the challenges they all face in addressing homelessness.

But it had only one concrete recommendation going into 2016: The city should invest in a public restroom. The rest of its recommendations were directed toward the community. The new task force hopes to build on this foundation and continue the conversation.

"One of the most important things we can do is make sure we're all speaking the same language," said Interim Police Chief Geoff Spalding. "To really make sure we have a good understanding of the problem, the issue or the concern."

'I love them'

LaMear has already asked Mary Docherty to serve on the new task force. Docherty runs



Dan Parkison and Ramon Navarrete build a new bike rack for the Astoria Warming Center at the First United Methodist Church.

the nonprofit organization Riverfolk that works to get homeless people birth certificates, identification cards and other documentation.

Docherty's own thinking around the issues of homelessness has changed substantially, she said. Two years ago, she started passing out warm coats on the Astoria Riverwalk. She was committed to the idea of accepting homeless individuals as they were, passing no judgment, never urging people to seek out religion or go to treatment or meetings.

"Well that changed," she said.

As she's settled into her niche — she has clients referred to her from state and county human services organizations — she has also changed her approach.

Religion is still off the table, unless someone asks her about her own Buddhist faith, but drug, alcohol and mental health treatment are not.

"I want everybody to go to a meeting," she said. "I'm not even bashful about it anymore. ... I love them, and I care about what they feel, but I can't, in good conscience, just enable them."

She is part of a group — primarily women — who have taken on the task of addressing homelessness themselves in sometimes very different ways. They have strong community support; they also have



Volunteers are busy getting the warming center ready to open at the First United Methodist Church in Astoria.

critics. But homelessness is a question that the community must wrestle with, they say.

They have all found their particular areas to focus on. Corri Buck, for instance, provides regular lunches at the Peoples Park along the Riverwalk, while Docherty has stopped serving weekend brunch at Astoria Armory so she can focus on the work of getting people identification. When Buck can't make it down to serve lunch, though,

Docherty will step in to do it for her.

When someone Docherty has been working with to get a birth certificate or a state identification card goes missing, they all come together to form a search party. When certain homeless people cause trouble in the city, they tell them to knock it off.

While similar alliances and networks exist across some social services in Astoria, Docherty and Buck would

like to see a concentrated, communitywide effort to answer the questions a homeless population raises and fill service gaps.

Volunteers desperately needed

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Climate Prediction Center says a cooler-than-normal winter is possible this year. The prediction could mean a difference of just a few degrees, not necessarily abnormal winter conditions. But for Astoria and Warrenton's warming centers and the homeless people who depend on the beds there, a few degrees can change everything.

Astoria's warming center has been open several years now. Warrenton's warming center first began operations last year.

This year, the Warrenton center's organizers plan to open on Wednesday, too. They also follow similar temperature, wind chill and rainfall parameters as Astoria

to determine when to open. Both centers desperately need volunteers.

"We have a location and money and a plan," said Warrenton City Commissioner Rick Newton, who serves on the center's board. "The only thing we're short is volunteers."

The Astoria center requires more than 100 volunteers to operate. Newton estimates Warrenton needs around 70. Like the Astoria center, their one goal is to "keep people from freezing to death," he said.

As of yet, the Warrenton center has not had to jump through the hoops the Astoria center has had to navigate. It also has found a home in a church. Organizers are working to develop relationships with local police and Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare. Like the Astoria center, they operate as a low-barrier organization and seek to connect the homeless to outside organizations for housing, work, mental health and other related needs.

Dan Parkison, president of the Astoria Warming Center board, has spent the last month getting the First United Methodist Church's basement ready for winter. When the Astoria Planning Commission issued the conditional use permit, it came with a list of conditions. Neighbors had testified about trash and noise outside the basement when the center was open.

Parkison and his board have since implemented new security measures, landscaped the area, established a volunteer handbook and a system of responding to a variety of situations, among other changes.

A neighborhood meeting is scheduled for Tuesday. It will be the first of several meetings Parkison and board members plan to hold in the winter and spring to check in with the community about interactions between the neighborhood and the people the center serves. After all, the center will have to go through the permitting process again when their permit expires next year.

Thompson: 'I'm not interested in inflating anybody's budget'

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"At no time will the board engage in travel that will result in costs beyond what is provided for in the current year budget unless the travel is specifically approved by the board and additional resources are authorized pursuant to Oregon Budget Law," the board's travel policy, which was revised in 2014, reads.

Thompson responded by insisting that her trips to conferences and training are attempts to build relationships and bring resources to the county. It was also part of an ongoing effort to spur other commissioners to develop specific long-term goals.

"I'm not interested in inflating anybody's budget," Thompson said. "This is to do work, this isn't out partying. I believe in budgets, but I also believe in a plan."

But Commissioner Sarah Nebeker questioned the value of the trips.

"I can't seem to measure anything that you have done that would make a difference other than what staff already does," Nebeker said. "We have an overall budget, and I think we need to adhere to it."

The discussion came after fighting between Thompson and other commissioners. In October, Lee urged Thompson to resign due to the expense issue, as well as an incident in June in which she

placed her hands on a county employee. Thompson has fiercely resisted Lee's call to resign and affirmed her desire to remain on the board.

As commissioners spoke Wednesday, a spectator repeatedly held up a sign that said "resign" on one side and "censure" on another to express his displeasure with Thompson. Thompson briefly stopped her remarks and asked Lee to call the meeting to order. The chairman obliged, instructing the man to put the sign away.

The scene reflected an attempt at civility, and it was not the only one.

During Wednesday's discussion, Thompson repeatedly offered to pay for her own travel expenses, an idea that Lee said was a good potential solution.

In September, an investigation into the incident involving Thompson touching a county staffer revealed she claimed to be "the only commissioner who worked." Pressed by Nebeker on the statement Wednesday, Thompson clarified she was referring to her efforts on housing issues rather than condemning commissioners' work ethic in general. Nebeker thanked her for the explanation.

"I would like us to call it a truce," Commissioner Kathleen Sullivan said. "I really would like to move forward in a positive way, so I hope we can do that."

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