

Shelter: ‘We’re here because ... we want you to stay alive’

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“It’s more of a regulated center, if you will,” said Annie Martin, who took over as board president this season. Former president Dan Parkison, who helped lead the warming center through the conditional use process, stepped down because of health reasons.

“I think we are just part of the community more,” Martin said.

Soon the warming center board will prepare to renew the conditional use permit, a process that went smoothly last year. But when it comes to really planning for the future, Martin is waiting for the city to finish developing rules for warming centers in general. City leaders postponed the work so staff could finish drafting codes to address Airbnb-type vacation rentals.

Uncertain status

A longstanding concern was that the warming center’s uncertain status would keep the center out of the running for important grants.

That fear has not proven to be true, Miltenberger said. So far, only one organization has cited the conditional use permit as a reason not to award grant money. Still, clear city rules will help the center establish firmer footing, Martin said.

Though Martin and board members have looked at other locations, the Methodist church remains ideal. It is already equipped with a kitchen, showers and laundry facilities. Besides, until the city finalizes rules for warming centers, the warming center would have to operate under a conditional use permit no matter where it was located.

For a moment, the warming center was the only one in the region after an emergency shelter on Washington state’s Long Beach Peninsula closed for good. A warming center in Warrenton has since pushed to reopen, and Helping Hands, which provides services and transitional housing, opened a new facility in Astoria that includes an emergency shelter.

In December, Helping Hands recorded 376 overnight stays at the new shelter in Uniontown.

The warming center, which opens only when temperature or rainfall is predicted to hit certain thresholds, saw an average of around 25 people each night it was open last season, Martin said. After opening for this season in mid-November, 236 overnight stays in 15 nights were logged by early December.

Warming center staff haven’t seen much of an increase in the number of people seeking shelter, even with the closure of the warming center across the river, Martin said. But it’s been a mild winter, she noted. They have seen more people come in for dinner and then go back to camps elsewhere in the city. They have also seen more seniors on fixed incomes who have been priced out of their homes.

A night out of the cold

Kris Williamson relied on the shelter on the Long Beach Peninsula until it closed. He has now traveled to stay the night at the Astoria Warming Center a handful of times.

“It’s a lot better than being out in the cold and the rain and the wind,” Williamson said as he ate dinner at the warming center Sunday night.

Cheryl Paul, the warming center’s manager for the past three years, believes policy changes precipitated by the city’s conditional use permit and the good-neighbor agreement have been good overall — as onerous as the discussions were at the time.

There was an adjustment period, though, as people who stayed at the emergency shelter became accustomed to the new rules and requirements.

“Last year there was a little bit of resistance,” she said. “This year, it’s the way it is. ... We have a really good group right now.”

Things are cleaner, quieter.

The warming center organizes regular cleanup crews to patrol the neighborhood and continues to operate under a “zero tolerance” policy for bad behavior — people may be banned from the shelter if they don’t follow the rules.

So far this season, police have responded to the warming center four times. It is difficult to sort through the calls, since some may have originated near the warming center and not come from the facility itself, but Police Chief Geoff Spalding said there were around 23 calls in 2018, most of them disturbances.

Officer Kenny Hansen, the police department’s homeless liaison, said he fields com-



An individual’s belongings lie stacked outside the warming center prior to opening.

Colin Murphey
The Daily Astorian

plaints about people hanging out in alcoves downtown on nights when the warming center is operating, waiting for the doors to open.

Last year, as one season ended and the board looked ahead to the next, board mem-

bers debated how they would continue to fund the warming center and keep paid staff. They wondered if they should — or even could — make other cuts. Now, the center is applying for more and more grants and proac-

tively engaged in fundraising, Miltenberger said.

“We’re going to end this season in good shape,” she said.

Money and volunteers

The center’s annual budget runs around \$42,000, a large part of which pays for staffing. The rest of the money goes toward liability insurance, rent, utilities and other costs.

“If we get a significant number of (grants) awarded to us, that will be a big step to sustainable funding,” Miltenberger said.

To Miltenberger and other board members, a challenge as big, if not bigger, than

money is finding a way to consistently attract and maintain volunteers. Around 300 people signed up at some point to be volunteers, but operations are still sustained by a core group of just under 30 people.

Despite the policy changes, the warming center’s mission is the same. The center doesn’t allow people to bring in drugs or alcohol and they must turn over any weapons for the night — often items like pocket knives or tools — but it remains a low-barrier shelter.

“We’re here because no matter what you’re doing, we want you to stay alive,” Martin said.

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