

Homeless: Astoria Warming Center is in demand every night

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organizations are definitely an accomplishment.

'A huge issue'

The task force's roster going into 2019 includes 21 members — representatives of downtown businesses, Columbia Memorial Hospital, mental health services, food banks, housing programs, advocacy groups, city and county government, police and the school district.

Alan Evans, the executive director of Helping Hands, is the only member who has been homeless in the past.

Under new Mayor Bruce Jones, the task force plans to continue meeting every four to six weeks and hopes to begin moving forward on identifying programs, recommending policies and establishing priorities.

"(Homelessness) is such a huge issue and we need to keep talking about it and keep it on the front burner," said LaMear, who will continue as a member-at-large on the task force. "I learn something every single meeting I come to."

The city can't create a utopia where nobody is homeless, said Annie Martin, president of the Astoria Warming Center's board, but it's important that groups like the task force exist and acknowledge the needs in the community.

"(Homelessness) is something that can't be ignored," she said. "Because it's not going away."

More than a hundred homeless people attended the annual Project Homeless Connect event in Seaside on Tuesday, a "one-stop shop" for people in need of services that brings together dozens of nonprofit, governmental and faith-based agencies under one roof.

The Astoria Warming Center is in demand every



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

The cleanup of a homeless camp near Astoria took place in early November.

night it is open during the winter months. Affordable housing is still scarce.

Though numerous downtown businesses support social services and organizations like the warming center through food and donations, tensions still bubble up around issues like loitering, panhandling or public defecation and urination.

Astoria police say officers are now encountering homeless people who seem more confrontational and aggressive, Spalding said at a task force meeting on Thursday.

"It's not the group that's been here for a while," clarified Kenny Hansen, the police homeless liaison officer. "It's more the ones that are passing through, that are new to the community."

Their behavior could be a way of testing police, commented one man from the audience.

Or, countered Hansen, "It could be a reflection of how they were treated in the community they were in last time."

'Action has to be taken'

Todd Tobey, who owns the McDonald's on Marine Drive, as well as six other McDonald's restaurants on the coast, says he and his employees seem to be dealing with a particularly aggressive and difficult subset of the homeless population more and more.

On Thursday, he described issues he had with people who panhandle on the sidewalk in front of the Astoria McDonald's and who are using the restrooms inside as a shower, alarming customers. Nearly every day, multiple times throughout the day, people stand at the exit for the drive-thru and hold up cardboard signs asking for help.

In past years, Tobey and his managers felt comfortable talking to the homeless and asking them to move on if they were causing a problem. Most people were polite, relatively easy to deal with and talk to.

Many different types of people are homeless for a variety of reasons, Tobey

told the task force. He understands and appreciates the work the task force is doing. It's a tough situation, he said. He's glad there is a group taking the time to try to address a complex array of needs and issues.

But Tobey no longer feels he can ask his managers to go out and confront people. It hasn't been safe. An employee recently had a beer bottle flung at them.

He doesn't want anyone to get into trouble or be arrested, but the presence of panhandlers and frequent homeless traffic through the restaurant is costing him business. Now, he calls the police to ask people to move along. It's not really a solution, though.

He expressed a frustration that others, including some task force members, have voiced ever since the group first started meeting: That the group was only there to talk.

Last May, Bill Van Nostran, the pastor of First Presbyterian Church, abruptly resigned from the group after he made heated com-

ments that the task force was overthinking the problem instead of focusing on specific solutions.

At that meeting in May, Spalding replied that homelessness is a complex problem. He understood the frustration, he told Van Nostran.

"But we need to truly understand the problem before we can come up with solutions that are viable," he said.

Nearly eight months after Van Nostran's exit, Tobey posed a similar question Thursday: What has been done?

"Action has to be taken," he said, adding, "We've got to do more than just talk about it."

'Storming, forming and norming'

Tom Leiner, co-owner of Pat's Pantry downtown, replied that many groups go through a "storming, forming and norming" process. For the past year, the homelessness task force has been in a long brainstorming session, he said. Now they are beginning to identify projects.

Some task force members, and several people who routinely attend the meetings, still believe the city should designate land where people can camp legally. Nearly all agree that housing, or, at the very least, emergency and transitional shelter, is key.

"Once you have some kind of shelter, you can work on the rest of your life from there," Martin said.

On Thursday, many task force members, including LaMear, emphasized their desire to establish a daytime drop-in center, somewhere people can go to shower, wash their clothes, eat a meal and access other services.

In the next year or two, Elaine Bruce, the executive director of Clatsop

Community Action, hopes the task force could find a way to offer or recommend ways to offer incentives for private and nonprofit developers to create more affordable housing. In addition to a drop-in center, she and Leiner want to explore ways to offer more job skills training and programs.

Former City Councilor Cindy Price, who will continue to be a member of the task force, believes the group has a role to play in recommending policies to the City Council.

In recent meetings, more items are being assigned to subcommittees to explore and flesh out.

One subcommittee is examining a possible fine forgiveness program so people without resources can begin to address court fines that have stacked up over the years. These fines, many of which stem from small violations but compound when a person fails to show up in court and explain their situation, are big barriers for homeless people who are trying to improve their situation, advocates say.

Another subcommittee was assigned Thursday to explore a "homeward bound" program. For people who have good family connections or community support elsewhere but are stuck in Astoria, this program would find a way to reconnect them and pay their way home.

The task force needs to continue to meet and share information so the people involved have a better idea of how to address homelessness, Jones said.

"We're going to face the homeless issues for years and years to come," he told the group Thursday. "It's not something we're going to solve. It's something we're going to keep working on, whittling away at."



Thank you for your support - Lower Columbia River Chief Petty Officers Association

The Lower Columbia River Chief Petty Officer Association (LCR CPOA) extends our members gratitude to the entire North Coast. The community's residents embraced the LCR CPOA chapter with donations that we were able to distribute to families associated with Coast Guard units in southern Washington including Grays Harbor, Cape Disappointment and Kennewick, and northern Oregon communities including Garibaldi, Portland as well as right here in the Astoria/Warrenton/Seaside area.

The shutdown event and this community's response has defined what Coast Guard City really means. North Coast residents rallied behind the LCR CPOA chapter with its generous financial donations as well as tremendous support for the "Be the Light Food Pantry" all in the name of assisting our Coasties during the government shutdown. The LCR CPOA used your donations to provide immediate grants for recipients to pay bills and gift card disbursement to USCG members that needed to make ends meet. With continuing resolution signed for the next three weeks we are cautiously optimistic that things will return normal. Ever in the shadow of stalled legislation, if the government remains unfunded the LCR CPOA chapter will continue to work to provide Coast Guard members and other federal employees in need, grants and donations to assist them as we continuing to serve the public.

The vision of the LCR CPOA is to continue to represent the richest traditions of service through assisting active duty Coast Guard members in difficult situations, as well as integrating and interfacing with our North Coast community through fund raising projects, donations to community organizations, continued support to local schools, and funding our established scholarship at Clatsop Community College.

There are so many businesses and residents that we want to thank, and we will work towards that individually in the near term. For the community we extend our deepest thank you from the LCR CPOA. Your support for our group is appreciated.

My Most Sincere Thank You to our COMMUNITY!
Senior Chief Matthew Gerber

President Lower Columbia River Chief Petty Officer Association