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Shelter for the Homeless

A lifeline brings families out from the cold

BY KIM CHRISTIANSEN
SPECIAL TO THE PORTLAND
OBSERVER

Its 6:30 p.m. on a rainy weekday and a line of homeless families snake around the corner of Parkrose Community United Church of Christ.

Those in line, half of them children, have exhausted all other housing options and have no place else to go.

At 7 p.m., the homeless will file into the Human Solutions' Family Winter Shelter, where the church space provides a warm place to spend the night and a hot meal, but also a chance at obtaining housing.

On any given night in Portland, more than 4,500 local people have nowhere to live, one-third of them families with children.

The Winter Family Shelter is part of an expandable system developed by Multnomah County and the Family Shelter to Housing Partnership to protect the health of vulnerable homeless people in families.

Due to limited space and funding, only homeless families with children and single-pregnant women are allowed in the winter shelter, open until spring. The rest are referred to other shelters in the area.

This year the winter shelter can sleep up to 80 people, up from 60 the year prior. If the shelter exceeds its capacity during the winter, another church will open its doors to bring homeless families inside.

Families arrive in the evening, and must be out by morning. Last month, between 40 and 60 adults and children slept on cots throughout the church's three available rooms. The number of children — from infants to teens — has ranged from 10 to as many as 29.

During the day, the homeless can go to Human Solution's Daybreak shelter, where those without families are also referred. The daybreak shelter has a capacity of 15 people, but is open day and night all year long.

According to Jean DeMaster,



Rahsaan Vernon and his children Hunter, 6, and Lily, 4, were homeless until they were referred to Human Solutions' Family Winter Shelter. The family now has permanent housing and the non-profit will continue to help the family reach long-term stability.

Human Solutions' executive director, there is a higher percentage of people of color in the shelter system than the percentage of people of color living in Multnomah County.

In 2011, she said that of the 96 percent of people staying at the daybreak shelter, about 22 percent identified themselves as African-American, triple the 5.6 percent of African-Americans living in Multnomah County.

The winter shelter housed 555 people during 2011 to 2012, and about 23 percent identified themselves as African-American.

Emergency shelters are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to serving homeless families.

Human Solutions' goal is to get families out of shelter and into stable, safe housing as soon as possible.

Once a homeless family has housing, the family can begin working with a family advocate or housing specialist at Human Solutions to devise a plan to permanently stabilize their situation.

A 34-year-old father, Rahsaan Vernon, for example, was couch-surfing with his two young children after he had removed his children from an unsafe domestic situation.

Child Protective Services referred him to Human Solutions' Family Winter Shelter.

"This is my first time in a shelter, but it has been a blessing," Vernon said. "I really feel like I'm at home. The employees and volunteers here go out of their way to make people feel safe and welcome."

After a week's stay at the shelter, Vernon's housing specialist delivered the good news: he and his children will be moving into an apartment soon.

As the largest provider of shelter and housing for homeless families in Multnomah County, Human Solutions serves more than 740 homeless people in 250 homeless families on any given night.

"We are here to provide emergency shelter and housing so families with children do not have to sleep in their cars or outside in dangerous situations," said DeMaster.

But our ultimate goal is to help homeless families obtain permanent

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