

**SHELTER** from page 1A

The SSSS formed in 2019, but as the team began to look for volunteers in the Siuslaw region in the midst of a pandemic, the need for helping students in unstable living situations has become more vital.

"The number of homeless is going up," Mann-Heintz said, quoting statistics given by the Department of Education during its "Supporting Students and Families Experiencing Homelessness During COVID-19 Pandemic" webinar. "They said that between 2015 and 2018, the national average was three percent homeless. Between 2019 and now, it's 5.6 percent. So that's nearly double the number of homeless people. To me, that just speaks to the importance of having a safe shelter and having assistance."

The definition of homelessness for schools is broader than one may usually think, and it's been an issue in the Siuslaw Region for quite some time.

"It's defined as a person who has an unstable place of residence," Mann-Heintz said. "That includes being

homeless. It also includes being doubled up. Being in a temporary situation like camping in an RV or a trailer or a tent, something like that. Doubled up is living with family and friends, but not necessarily a permanent place. And it includes couch surfing. Particularly our young people end up couch surfing from place to place."

Another common form of unstable housing is families living with grandparents.

"With some families, that's an okay arrangement," said Mann-Heintz. "But some people who are doubled up can have a change of circumstances. Maybe one of the grandparents becomes ill or has a stroke and suddenly they can't deal with having the whole family there. So then it becomes an unstable situation, particularly if the grandparents are the ones who own the home or are paying rent."

The seasonal nature of employment in the community can also cause issues.

"We have more people here between March and October, and then a lot of people leave, go somewhere else, and then come back," Mann-Heintz said. "What



(From left) Sharon Dengler, Linda Moy, Robben Lyons, Whitney Sciotto, Suzanne Mann-Heintz, Ann Lathrop and Dave Moursund, representatives from Safe Families for Children of Lane County and from Florence's Safe Shelter for Siuslaw Students, celebrated their new partnership to develop a network of host homes in west Lane County with a luncheon at Fresh Harvest on June 27.

that does to students is it causes this transiency. And it's very hard for students to maintain their focus on getting good grades and understanding what's going on and getting credit for classes."

While the causes of student homelessness are varied, SSSS has worked to implement strategies to help ease the burden.

"We're trying so hard to provide a stable place for children and their families to be," Mann-Heintz said.

The first strategy to help is simple: providing short term emergency vouchers to local motels for families who find themselves in difficult situations.

"Maybe they have a place but it's not going to be available for a few days," Mann-Heintz said. "Or they're getting social services from Siuslaw Outreach Services (SOS) and are going to get money for deposits, but they have to wait to be approved."

The second strategy is a network of host homes that can temporarily take in children when families are having difficult times. The stays at host homes are not meant to be long term, with the average time being less than three months. SSSS is working in conjunction with Safe Families of Lane County on the project.

"The goal of Safe Families is to keep families together," Mann-Heintz said. "97 percent of the children that go into a host home are then returned to their natural families. They work very, very closely with the Oregon Department of Human Services, which acknowledges that too often, children end up in foster care unnecessarily when it could be dealt with on a shorter term basis."

The reasons parents would turn to Safe Families are varied and complex.

"I heard about a woman who had two preschoolers and was expecting a third child," Mann-Heintz said. "The doctor said her blood pressure was too high and she needed to do bed rest for the remainder of her pregnancy. So she was able to put

her preschoolers with Safe Families and a host home for a period of eight weeks."

The mother was also able to use the time to find a new place to live, as the house her family was living in lacked heat and hot water. Without having to care for her preschool children, she was able to find a new place to live.

"During that eight week period, she really turned her life around. Safe Families was able to help facilitate that," Mann-Heintz said.

Another example was a single father who had to serve time for unpaid parking tickets and place his son in a host home, while another parent went into rehab for a short period to deal with substance abuse issues. In many of these circumstances, the children risked being sent to foster care permanently, but Safe Families prevented that.

"There's a whole range of reasons families find themselves in these situations," Mann-Heintz said.

While the host family cares for the child, a range of support personnel is put into place in what Mann-Heintz called the "Safe Families constellation."

"There's a family coach, which is a person that acts as a liaison between the family that's taking care of the children and the family that's placing the children," she said. "They're the ones who arrange for visits at a neutral place, for phone calls. If the family in need has things they need to work out, the coach helps with those things."

There's a family friend, which helps bring normalcy to the situation including picnics in the park or helping shuttle kids to school when issues arrive.

"And then there's the resource friend, somebody who doesn't have what it takes to do one-on-one care of children anymore, but could easily take the family out to dinner once a month," Mann-Heintz said. "Or who could perhaps take the child school supply shopping. Maybe help with a winter coat."

The constellation creates a level of support for the volunteer host family so they are not burdened with having a new child in their home.

"We're just beginning that process," Mann-Heintz said, stating her program was looking for volunteers to sign up.

Volunteers with SSSS will get regular training, and have total control over the kind of students they allow in the home.

"If a child sounds too difficult for a family, it's okay for them to say, 'I don't think I can handle that,'" she said. "But most of the calls in Lane County are for children under six. If a person wants babies, they've got babies."

Background checks are required, as well as a home study to ensure the environment is safe for children.

"There are processes in place to try and maximize a positive outcome to any situation," said Mann-Heintz. "Whether the placing family or the host family has a problem, it's all voluntary and it can be ended at any time."

The third strategy SSSS is working on is the Mommy Mentor program.

"The grandmother in me got excited about this," Mann-Heintz said. "This is somebody who probably already has children of their own, or is interested in helping a young mom who needs a little bit of support. The Mommy Mentor is supposed to make contact twice a month. It could be a phone call, a visit, an outing. It can be as simple as checking in and seeing if there's any problems. It could also be the young mom saying, 'I really need to have some time to myself.' So the Mommy Mentor will just come over and hang out with the baby to give the mom a break."

Mann-Heintz saw the need for the strategy while working with Lane County's 90by30 initiative, noticing that many young families in the Siuslaw Region live away from family support.

"They're isolated. This is to provide a more experienced person to come in and say, 'How can I help you make this easier?' The first year of life can be stressful. There's lots of reasons why," Mann-Heintz said.

Finally, SSSS is working with the Siuslaw Vision to create the Western Lane Emergency Response Network (WLERN), which acts as a resource hub to match

parents in need to those who are able to give.

"For example, say I'm a mom and I need to have diapers and I don't have diapers. So I send a message to WLERN, which will relay it to an advocate. The advocate will relay it to organizations or people who say they can provide diapers. And then somebody will say to the advocate, 'We have 36 diapers that we can get to this mom.' The advocate then arranges the diapers to be delivered."

It's a streamlined way to connect generous providers in the community to those in need.

"I've gotten calls from people who say, 'I got this \$1,200 check from the government and I really don't need it. What should I do?'"

This is a means by which we can facilitate that," Mann-Heintz said.

SSSS has other plans for the future to help local families, including the development of Home With a Heart, a shelter that would be able to house small families or unaccompanied minors.

"We're working on developing that aspiration, but it's probably a little bit down the road," Mann-Heintz said.

The program has already created multiple partnerships in the community to get all strategies off the ground, from Siuslaw School District, SOS, Florence Food Share, Boys and Girls Clubs of Western Lane County, First Step and Cross Road Assembly of God. SSSS has also received grants from the Western Lane Community Foundation and the Saint Mary's Men's Club to develop the host home program.

But what the program really needs right now is volunteers to get the strategies in motion.

Mann-Heintz encourages anyone interested in volunteering or donating to call her directly at 541-590-0779. They can also visit safeshelterforsiuslawstudents.org, which has further information on the program.

On Friday, July 10, the program will be hosting an online Zoom meeting going over the program as a whole. The hour-long meeting begins at 4 p.m. Those interested can call Mann-Heintz or email her at safeshelter12@gmail.com for a Zoom invitation to the event.

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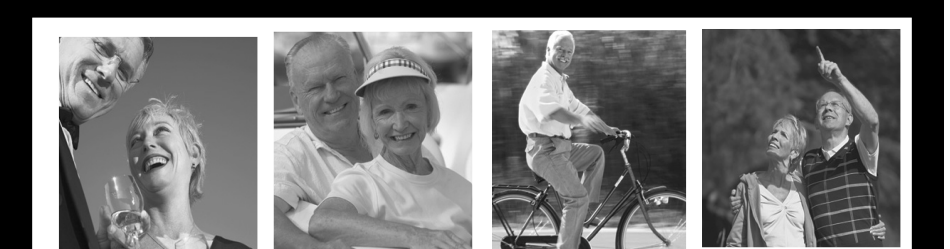
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