

# ‘It is a home visit, but their home is outside’

For homeless liaisons, the outreach is often personal

By ERICK BENGEL  
The Astorian

It’s shortly after 8 a.m. on the Astoria Riverwalk, just east of the trolley stop near Safeway. Cheryl Paul and Jodi Anderson, the homeless liaisons of Clatsop Community Action, stroll toward the bushes and greet a 44-year-old man who emerges from a small, makeshift shelter.

“Anything going on?” Paul asks him. “Oh, just the same,” he said, clutching a small coffee in one hand, a bag of tobacco in the other. He’s broke and waiting for the beginning of the month. For much of the last three years, he’s been homeless.

Paul tells him he’s high on the list to get into the Merwyn Apartments, the renovated affordable housing complex downtown.

“Really?” he said. “You may be next, so you need to make sure that you’re checking in with them,” Paul said.

“OK,” he said. He’s in the queue for a studio apartment, as long as he follows through with the property manager. “Please check in with her, OK?” Paul urges.

“Uh-huh.” “And then we’ll help you after that, you know?” Paul said. “Don’t spend all your time down here and not check in and miss your apartment ...”

“OK.” “... because she can’t get a hold of you, you know? Got it?”

He said he planned to head that way after he finishes his coffee.

The conversation is casual, but Paul’s drift is intentional, structured. She is helping the man, who has autism, map out his day, break it down into little missions that, taken together, could make his life better, or at least prevent it from getting worse.

Paul, the former coordinator of the Astoria Warming Center, a seasonal, low-barrier homeless shelter, has known him for about three years, when he became a frequent overnight guest. Anderson met him when she served dinner there.

Paul reminds the man it is “shower day,” a thrice-a-week service where he can wash up and get some fresh clothes at the warming center. She and Anderson want him to look nice when he visits the Merwyn. And later that day, they tell him, there would be pizza at Ninth Street Park furnished by Filling Empty Bellies.

But, she tells him, make sure you check in with the Merwyn so that apartment doesn’t go to someone else. “I want you, you, you to be housed,” Paul encourages.

“He’s kind of special to us,” Paul said afterward. She and Anderson worry about him. He may become frustrated, not show up at all.

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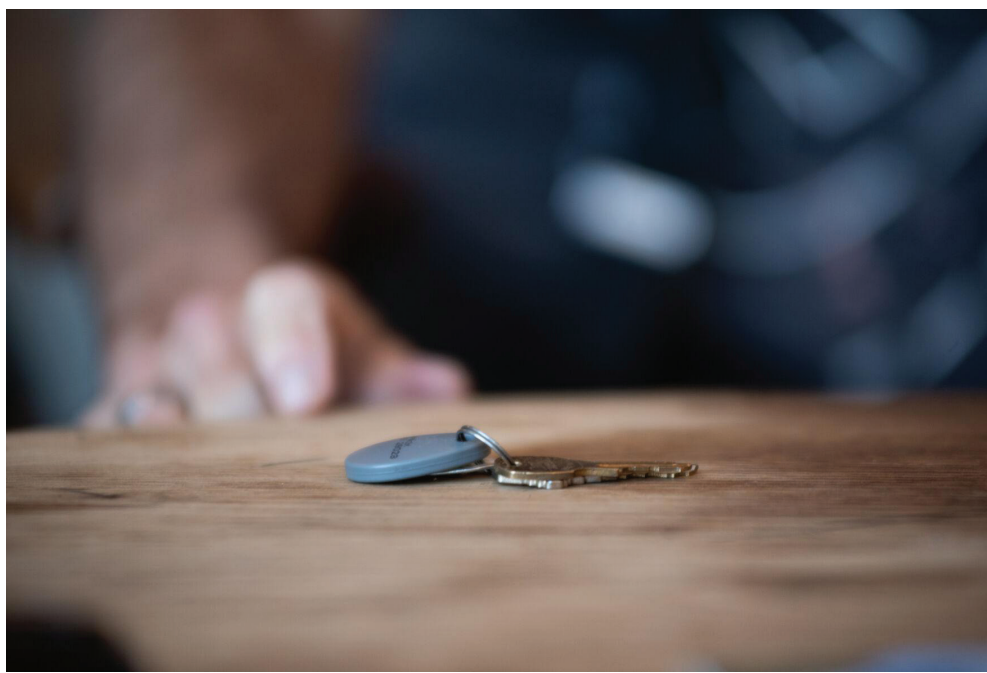
The homeless liaisons — born of a recommendation from Astoria’s homelessness solutions task force and inspired by similar outreach in other cities — were launched in spring. They work to connect the local homeless population with services that can assist them: food access, medical care, drug treatment, transportation, legal services, aid for veterans, places to get clean — all bending toward housing as the ultimate goal.

They also introduce them to the state Department of Human Services, Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare and The Harbor, an organization that advocates for people who have faced sexual assault and domes-



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Cheryl Paul, left, and Jodi Anderson stop at the Garden of Surging Waves in Astoria.



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Housing is the ultimate goal for Clatsop Community Action’s homeless liaisons.

tic violence.

According to Clatsop Community Action, since April the pair have logged about 2,000 miles in Paul’s blue Subaru Outback, which is packed with bottled water, snacks from the Astoria Food Pantry, spare blankets and clothing such as socks and underwear. The liaisons have reached out to about 90 people, many of them repeatedly. The average is about 14 contacts per day, Paul said.

They’ve helped get seven people into the Merwyn, and a veteran into housing near the Astoria Aquatic Center, according to Viviana Matthews, the executive director of Clatsop Community Action.

Matthews said at a May forum that the county had more than 1,000 people experiencing homelessness in 2020. “We’re talking about 1,000 people who are staying in a place not meant for human habitation,” which includes streets, shelters and vehicles, she said.

## Home visits

Paul said that having relationships already in place from her warming center days made her new job “1,000 percent” easier. The liaisons know the places their clientele haunt — not just the high-profile hangouts, like Ninth Street Park and the Garden of Surging Waves downtown, where a rising homeless presence has attracted attention, but the doorways where they take cover.

“It is a home visit, but their home is outside,” Anderson said.

Paul often knows who’s around by seeing a cart and its contents, or clothing and bedding left behind. She recognized a woman from a distance by the pink shoes she was wearing; they had come from Paul’s car.

After the pair visited the Riverwalk, they drove through Astoria looking for two young women who have been struggling on the street, have even been beaten up. The liaisons wanted to see if anything was obviously wrong, if they were passed out on the sidewalk somewhere, but the women weren’t in their usual spots outside bars, banks or other establishments.

En route to Seaside, the liaisons scoped out Warrenton’s Premarq Center, but no one was there, nor was anyone at the restrooms behind the Seaside Carousel Mall. For many of the liaison’s regulars, it was simply too early.

At one point, Paul and Anderson drove by the restrooms near the Seaside Chamber of Commerce. A group sheltering beneath the restrooms’ overhang was still tucked in; one of them lay within an improvised tent, an orange tarp draped over a bicycle. At a couple of sites — such as where avenues D and E meet behind Safeway — the liaisons left black trash bags, giving the people who dwell in the abutting thicket a means to pick up after themselves.

At a homeless hotspot on Avenue E, where a sign reads, “No loitering or soliciting,” they handed out water and bus passes. A young woman asked for Q-tips; Paul said she would bring some next time.

On Necanicum Drive, where people living out of trailers and campers park on either side of the road, Paul gave one woman who needs legal advice a card for the Oregon Law Center. When Paul knocked on another woman’s trailer door, she was greeted with a firm, “Go away!” Early in the job, the Seaside Police Department asked the liaisons to try persuading the nomads there to move along. For a time, they had accomplished it, but now the street is filling up

again, mostly with new arrivals.

Some would-be encounters have the potential to be problematic.

There is, for example, a homeless camp near the Seaside Depot on Alder Mill Avenue. Paul and Anderson have been advised by both Clatsop Community Action and Seaside police not to enter without a police request or a police escort. And some people just give off a bad vibe. “I’m not going to approach them,” Paul said.

## ‘I had all my arrogance burned out of me’

Back in Astoria, they brought a shell-pink bath towel to Bruce Zinzer, a 71-year-old they recently helped move into a fourth-floor studio apartment at the Merwyn. A long-retired claims adjuster, Zinzer had been living in his Lincoln Navigator, getting by on Social Security, camping at places like Saddle Mountain and across the river in Washington state.

“I had enough arrogance, I guess, to think that I could pull it off and stay that way for a while — and did for about a year or so,” he said.

But he ended up at the Astoria Warming Center. He had spent a handful of nights in the rain, exposed to the elements. “It majorly sucked,” he said. He had slept behind the American Legion, then in a restroom. “Wow, what a pathetic life,” he marveled. “That’s when it started adding up to me,” he said. “I mean, it really didn’t take much to convince me that maybe I ought to get an apartment again.”

“Anyway,” he added, “I had all my arrogance burned out of me.”

The liaisons helped him narrow down housing options, fill out his lease and apply for deposit and utility assistance, brought him kitchenware and other provisions — every tool they could provide to make sure he stays housed.

“You made the entire transition possible, and way, way easier,” he told Paul and Anderson.

Zinzer has enough street-level experience to know how much needs to be done to take even slight steps toward stability — all while looking daily for a secure place to eat, use the bathroom and sleep undisturbed. And all amid a pandemic. “I would have been overwhelmed,” he told the liaisons.

Just outside the Merwyn, the liaisons checked in with a man who suffers from Huntington’s disease, a brain disorder. And they observed a guy sleeping in the sun in a corner of the Garden of Surging Waves; he’s been on their outer radar, but Paul said it might be time to make overtures.

Later in the week, the liaisons found out what became of the man living in the bushes near Safeway.

He was scheduled to move into his new apartment.

# RVs: Vehicles could be towed at city expense, with risk of litigation

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“Obviously the word is out,” Seaside’s Pamela Schwenzer wrote. “Free camping in Seaside with a river view. There are no facilities for dumping waste or dirty water. I’m concerned about our river. This is adjacent to a playground and public restroom.”

“Having fled Portland four years ago, I have seen how such a setup can attract problems, causing a deterioration in livability in a neighborhood. We left Laurelhurst — I suspect you’ve heard of it.”

City Councilor Tita Montero said there is a lack of clarity between local ordinances, state law and a federal court ruling on homeless camping. The 9th U.S.



Vehicles parked in the lot north of Goodman Park on Necanicum Avenue.

R.J. Marx

Circuit Court of Appeals, which covers Oregon, has ruled that ordinances against sleeping outdoors on public property when there are no shelters available are unconstitutional.

“We’re also working on pulling information and strategies together so that the

council can look at what can we implement, what is going to be legal — first of all — and for the benefit of the whole community,” Montero said.

City Attorney Dan Van Thiel has said police are doing everything they can by creating a constant pres-

ence in the area. He said issuing citations is of limited value if people do not show up for court or pay fines. The city has not yet moved to tow vehicles, which he said would come at city expense and could subject the city to litigation.

While trash and unsan-

itary conditions have been concerns for neighbors, trash has not been an issue among those parked at the city lot, Public Works Director Dale McDowell said. “I have handed out trash bags, and they are picked up several times a week by the Public Works Street Department,”

he said.

At last Monday’s meeting, Mayor Jay Barber said homelessness is the issue that “kept him awake at night.”

A new state law approved this year requires that local regulations on sitting, lying, sleeping or keeping warm and dry in outdoor public spaces be objectively reasonable for the homeless. The law aims to protect the homeless from fines or arrest for camping on public property when there are no other options. Cities and counties must comply by July 2023.

“If we do not do that, or are unable to do that, then, as I understand this, they are permitted to lie asleep in any public property in our city,” Barber said. “That is truly a challenge.”