It's been a long, winding road to a stable winter shelter

By Michelle Arellan, Monday, November 4th 2019

If the measure of a community is how it treats its most vulnerable members, Ashland can stand tall on the shoulders of the caring individuals who launched an emergency winter shelter more than a decade ago at First Presbyterian Church.

The program grew — more nights, more volunteers, more venues. It was operated by unpaid individuals who set up cots, managed changing venues, brought food, listened to and stayed with the guests.

Their compassion may only have been surpassed by their commitment. By last season, the program included 12 community partners: First Presbyterian Church, First United Methodist Church, South Mountain Friends Meeting, Temple Emek Shalom, Trinity Episcopal Church, United Congregational Church of Christ, RV Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Southern Oregon Jobs with Justice, Ashland Culture of Peace Commission, city of Ashland, ACCESS, and the state of Oregon.

On Nov. 4, the Ashland winter shelter reopens, and for the first time it will be in a single location seven nights a week with each of its 45 guests having claim to the same cot all winter. For only the second time in its history, it will have a director, a full-time assigned navigator (case worker), and a hired volunteer coordinator.

What changed? Last season ACCESS provided funding for the shelter through Options for Helping Residents of Ashland (OHRA), which became the shelter program manager. With ACCESS funds, OHRA helped give the program consistency, structure and a paid staff. More importantly, the grant enabled OHRA to offer “wrap around” services through its resource center. Center staff and volunteers help people find money to preserve their homes, help the unhoused find homes, and help people find jobs. The center even helps guests get basic things like
identification (birth certificate and/or driver’s license), which is required to get earned benefits (such as VA or Social Security), a job or a home.

The shelter last year helped 19 people find housing, helped 45 people secure health coverage through OHP, helped 55 people apply for SNAP benefits, and an estimated 17 found permanent or temporary jobs.

The shelter’s evolution has been a long, bumpy ride. The outlook grew grim the season before last when Pioneer Hall, a key shelter facility, was ruled unsafe for sleeping. City officials, Ashland Culture of Peace Commission, the faith community and others spent months searching for space large enough for Ashland’s unhoused. The current site, at 2082 E. Main St., was identified, and OHRA signed the lease and applied for a county operating permit. However the permit was not issued in time to operate there last season. Once again, the faith and community organizations pulled together to host a rotating shelter.

“Rotating” understates the time and effort required to set up and break down the shelter every time it moved — and it moved around for five months. Volunteers worked more than 5,200 hours to keep the shelter going despite challenges. I wish there was space to recognize every Ashland individual who worked hard to keep the shelter going. But I will only name one: Heidi Parker, who for eight years recruited and managed volunteers amid the challenge of myriad sites.

To all who have toiled for those without homes, we thank you. Social services work is not glamorous. Results can take months or years. But you have made a difference to those in crisis, as well as to the tenor and tone of your city.

OHRA looks forward to working with everyone in Ashland who wants to help people battered by poverty, bad luck, unemployment, illness, addiction and other troubles find their way to stability. It will take a city. Join us!

Welcome Cass Sinclair, who recently joined OHRA as our shelter director. To meet her and some of the most dedicated people in Ashland volunteer. Email Cass at shelterdirector@helpingashland.org or call 541-708-6434. If you can’t volunteer, contribute by going to helpingashland.org and clicking on donate. Or send a check to OHRA, P.O. Box 1133, 97520, and designate your donation for the shelter.

Your gift could change a life.

*By Michelle Arellano is OHRA executive director.*