

McKay student gets \$100K youth-shelter grant



McKay High School senior Raul Marquez is getting substantial backing from a \$100,000 grant from the United Way of the Mid-Willamette Valley for his plan to create a youth homeless shelter. MOLLY J. SMITH/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Senior's pitch for shelter hit home

Jonathan Bach Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Raul Marquez, 18, went to a United Way board of directors meeting Tuesday to pitch his proposal for a youth homeless shelter in Salem.

He left with a \$100,000 grant.

Among all the homeless shelters scattered around town, none is dedicated to giving homeless youth a safe place to sleep at night.

The lack of a youth shelter "has just been a huge gap in available services in the community," said Jon Reeves, executive director of the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency.

Salem-Keizer Public Schools had 93 students classified as "unsheltered" during the 2016-17 academic year, according to the Oregon Department of Education.

Raul, a McKay High School senior, came armed Tuesday with homelessness statistics and a plan that synced perfectly with the nonprofit's mission to address Salem's homeless crisis.

Raul's presentation came like bucket of cold water to the face, said Bud



The potential site of a youth homeless shelter that Raul Marquez is working to create at 15th and Ferry Street SE is getting substantial backing for with the help of a United Way of the Mid-Willamette Valley \$100,000 grant. ANNA REED/STATESMAN JOURNAL

"How do you deal with not being able to see your parents?"

McKay senior Raul Marquez

After seeing a friend separated from his struggling family

See SHELTER, Page 3A

Shelter

Continued from Page 1A

Pierce, president of the United Way of the Mid-Willamette Valley's board of directors. No child should be left without a safe place to sleep at night, he said.

The idea with the \$100,000 was to make it easier for potential donors to sign on if Raul goes to them with a significant amount already, he said.

"That's a more effective way to get people to join the effort," Pierce said.

Pierce said Raul's proposal was comprehensive. To see a young person who really cares, that's what impacts you, Pierce said. "(It was) his passion, really, more than his words."

United Way wants the shelter to open within three to four months, if not sooner.

The grant will go toward the purchase of a building that homeless advocates can transform into a dedicated youth shelter.

Community action officials have applied for state and federal funding in the past to get a youth shelter online. But the absence of a building has deterred other funding, Reeves said.

"Everything's poised to come together," he said. "The facility's always been the question mark."

Once a building is lined up, community action officials will staff the operation. They're hoping to serve homeless youth with shelter day and night, plus a suite of services including mental health and reuniting kids with their families.

But that depends on money — they may need to start with just a nighttime shelter.

Raul already has a building in mind: the former Catarino Cavazos Center space at 220 15th St. SE. The Cavazos Center helped rehabilitate Latino youths involved in gang activity and operated under Catholic Community Services.

One of the locations' benefits is it's only a few blocks away from Salem-Keizer Public Schools' Students in Transition Educational Program office. The transition program supports students experiencing homelessness with services such as tutoring and helping them secure transportation, according to district spokeswoman Lillian Govus.

The neighborhood is already used to having a shelter. "It's nothing new coming in, necessarily," said Tricia Ratliff, program director of the HOME Youth & Resource Center.

It's also close enough to downtown to have a community feel rather than a downtown homeless shelter feel, while remaining close to transit services, Ratliff said.

There have been past prospects for buildings, but "none as perfect as this," she said.

The building's price tag is around \$310,000 and United Way and Raul's small team of students — his sister Ra-



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quel Marquez, 15, Janet Flores, 16, and Serena Miser, 16 — are spearheading efforts to raise the money to buy it. A United Way website — www.supportraul.com — has launched to ensure donations to the effort are tax-deductible.

But between Raul and United Way, "I think that traction is going to make all the difference," Reeves said.

If the old Cavazos Center falls through, United Way has vowed to find another building that will work. "We're committed," said Elizabeth Schrader, the non-profit's director of resource development. "Failure is not an option."

Raul, who has six siblings, is a busy guy.

He serves as the student body president at McKay and recently secured an internship with state Rep. Diego Hernandez, D-Portland, for the February legislative session.

"That same character that he brought to the United Way board, he brought to us," Hernandez said. Raul's voice, experience and ability to speak persuasively will be of huge benefit to Oregon, he said.

Raul hopes to study politics at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

On Tuesday, Raul was just looking to introduce board members to his shelter idea.

"We were in what we were going to call our, like, 'quiet phase,'" he said at McKay Friday.

That's because if the plan didn't work out, "How do you tell a community, 'Oh, we're not doing it anymore?'"

Living in Salem his whole life, Raul found it devastating to learn there was no overnight homeless shelter for youth.

He'd heard stories of homeless kids being affected by not having a roof over their heads. But it landed close to home when one of his friend's parents hit hard times and moved into a local shelter.

His friend was left bouncing from house to house.

"How do you deal with not being able to see your parents?" Raul said.

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