

HOMELESSNESS

Mobile showers coming to Salem's homeless in early August

A new mobile trailer will let people use the bathroom and shower in privacy, with smooth jazz playing over a speaker system. It's all thanks to a United Way campaign led by a South Salem student.

By Rachel Alexander – Salem Reporter July 18, 2019 at 12:22pm





Ken Houghton, outreach coordinator for the ARCHES Project, shows a prospective volunteer around a new mobile shower unit at a July 17, 2019 training. (Rachel Alexander/Salem Reporter)

Free showers will soon be available to homeless people in the greater Salem area after more than a year of effort by a local high school student and United Way of the Mid-Willamette Valley.

Volunteers trained this week to run a new mobile shower trailer, which has three self-contained bathrooms and showers. Volunteers said access to basic hygiene is important for people who often don't have the opportunity to get clean or use a bathroom.

"It's not just jobs – it's for them to be accepted by people in the community," said Zanne D'Anna, a prospective volunteer who works with HomeBase Shelters of Salem, a local nonprofit organization.

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Staff from the ARCHES Project will run the trailer and travel around the Mid-Willamette Valley to reach those who don't often come into downtown Salem.

"I've always been a big believer that the services need to go to them," said Ken Houghton, the outreach coordinator for ARCHES. Houghton will oversee the trailer and hopes to begin offering showers by early August.

The project grew out of work by Claire Adams, a South Salem High School graduate who began serving on the United Way board as a junior. Staff approached her about spearheading a fundraising effort in the spring of 2018.

Adams worked to figure out how to best provide mobile showers, using San Francisco-based organization Lava Mae as a model. She led a fundraising effort which brought in more than \$100,000 to purchase the trailer, as well as a truck and generator to operate it.

Joey Fried, a Lava Mae staff member, led volunteers Tuesday through the basics of "bringing radical hospitality" to guests. The organization operates mobile showers in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

"Once you can get clean on a regular basis, you see people start building themselves back up," he said.



Joey Fried, right, a staff member with Lava Mae, and ARCHES Project outreach coordinator Ken Houghton, left, train volunteers

on operating a mobile shower unit in the United Way parking lot on July 17, 2019 (Rachel Alexander/Salem Reporter)

The training included the mundane – how to disinfect showers after each guest – and the more colorful, like what to do if a client doesn't want to give their name at sign-up.

Fried said he works to build trust with each person who comes in and doesn't push people to give real names if they don't want to.

"I've had someone be Michael Jackson, Donald Trump, Larry Bird and Timothy McVeigh all in the same week," he said.

The trailer can store water in a 160-gallon tank, but ideally, Houghton wants to hold regular shower sessions at places where he can use a hose to connect to the city water supply.

A site with sewer access to dump grey water from the showers will allow them to serve about 45 people in six hours, he said.

A few local churches may be regular sites, he said, and he's working to find others.

"We want to kick out as many showers a day as possible," he said.



Volunteer Zanne D'Anna, left, examines the mobile shower trailer during a training at United Way on July 17, 2019 (Rachel Alexander/Salem Reporter)

He's also seeking regular sites in Mill City, Lyons, Stayton and other more rural areas around Salem.

Two showers have stairs leading up to them, while a third has a ramp for wheelchairs. Guests can use a toilet, sink and mirror inside, and Houghton said ARCHES plans to set up a tent with hair dryers and mirrors so people can do their grooming outside the shower.

Houghton plans to operate the trailer with one staff member and four volunteers. He'd like to build a roster of about 300 volunteers so each person only has to work a day or two every month.

Guests will get clean socks, underwear and bras to keep, as well as a fresh towel, washcloth and bathmat. United Way staff have run donation drives to keep those items stocked and reached out to local hotels and motels to find linens the businesses are getting rid of.

Anyone interested in volunteering or hosting the shower trailer can contact Houghton at

Kenneth.houghton@mwvcaa.org or 503-399-9080 ext. 4015.

The shower trailer came with one feature Houghton wasn't expecting – speakers in each unit, controlled by a central music system. He plans to bring music along so guests can experience “a moment of tranquility” away from the outside world – a bit of blues, a bit of rock.

“I'm kind of partial to smooth jazz myself,” he said.

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