



Ray Boyd exits a new trailer with three private showers that will soon be making its way around the area as a service for homeless people. Boyd lives in his car with his dog, Daisy, an Australian shepherd. Photographed at the United Way of the Mid-Willamette Valley in Salem on Tuesday. PHOTOS BY ANNA REED/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Nonprofits launch mobile showers for the homeless



Forward This

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Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

The ocean blue trailer parked in front of United Way headquarters caught Ray Boyd's eye as he was driving by in his Volkswagen bug, which he's been living in for several months.

He stopped to investigate, and the next thing he knew he was invited to try out one of the three private showers in the 22-foot-long customized trailer. Boyd eagerly accepted.

It's been two weeks since his last shower — after being admitted to Salem Hospital for complications from a narrowed esophagus — and he had no idea when his next one might be.

"I feel like a new person," he said as he emerged with a smile under his



bushy gray beard.

It's a reaction sure to be repeated as United Way of the Willamette Valley and ARCHES Project of the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency prepare to launch their free year-round service.

The mobile hygiene unit was a project instigated by Claire Adams, a South Salem High School graduate and teen board member for United Way.

"I wish she were here," Boyd said. "I'd hug her and tell her, 'Thank you.' "

A shower is something most people take for granted, but it's a luxury for the estimated 1,500 homeless people in Marion and Polk counties.

Some go months without bathing, and many make do with what's known on the streets as a "bird bath" in the sink of a public restroom.

At least one-third of those assessed for services in Marion County present with detectable signs of poor hygiene or daily living skills, according to ARCHES.

Experts believe access to a shower can restore dignity, renew confidence and empower the homeless to engage with their communities and seek services they need.

The trailer will soon be parked at various locations throughout Salem and the surrounding area, providing showers to those in need thanks to the

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shared missions of two local nonprofit agencies.

United Way raised \$100,000 for the project, using \$51,000 to order the shower unit factory direct from Rich Specialty Trailers in Indiana. It has three private stalls, each including a shower, a sink, and a toilet. One is ADA accessible.

United Way also conducted a sock and underwear drive and tapped area businesses for donations. More than 26 companies and organizations donated 2,800 pairs of socks and 1,700 pairs of underwear, meaning shower guests will leave with clean undergarments.

Home Depot donated a generator, and six local hotels (The Grand Hotel, Holiday Inn, DoubleTree by Hilton, Comfort Suites, Motel 6 and Howard Johnson by Wyn) provided more than 280 slightly blemished towels, washcloths, and hand towels.

The Marion County Sheriff's Office laundered the towels at its transition center.

ARCHES will run the day-to-day operations and used a grant from Oregon Housing and Community Services to purchase a 2019 Chevy Silverado for \$31,000 that will pull the trailer. Program director Ashley Hamilton said the organization is budgeting \$74,000 annually to operate the shower unit, including the salary of one staff member.

Outreach coordinator Kenneth Houghton is the driver and the lead operator.

"This is a huge gift to the community," Houghton said. "I'm just so proud to be a part of the project."

The interior of the trailer is done in whites and greys, the exterior in bright blues with waves, polka dots and water droplets. The wrap was designed by Elizabeth Schrader, resource development director for United Way. Her intent was to create an upbeat, fresh look that would foster engagement and improve public perception.

"The whole point is this isn't supposed to feel clinical," said Andrew Galen, United Way's director of strategic initiatives. "This will be one of the few places these folks can shut the door behind them and have a quiet place of respite. It's really about dignity more than anything."

"How do we restore their dignity?" said Ron Hays, executive director of United Way. "The first step is getting them clean. Then we can talk about the next steps."

Organizers plan to park the trailer in geographically diverse locations.

"This is an initiative that belongs to the community," Hamilton said. "It's not just downtown, but South Salem, Keizer, Woodburn, Mill City, even farther up the Santiam Canyon. We want to get to people who can't get to us."

The hope is to identify an individual's root cause of homelessness, provide them a housing assessment, and connect them to services.

The biggest challenge for the project will be securing sites to park the trailer. Houghton has been busy scouting locations and meeting with prospective hosts, including churches. Some have expressed interest but don't have the necessary utilities.

The goal is to serve about 45 people in six hours. To maximize use, the trailer needs access to a water source and a sewer cleanout to dump grey water from



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the showers.

Churches are ideal because they generally have large parking lots. Some in talks with Houghton are already part of the ARCHES network of warming centers.

One idea is to schedule shower service on days that churches offer free hot meals. The goal is to eventually have a regular schedule at regular sites.

The trailer could park initially at ARCHES near downtown, but that will soon be a redundant service. Renovations on its day center should be completed in a couple of months, including four restrooms with shower capabilities.

ARCHES will rely on teams of four or five volunteers to assist Houghton, unlike Lava Mae, the California nonprofit the program is modeled after. Lava Mae uses paid staff to operate its mobile shower units.

Anyone interested in volunteering should contact KayLynn Gesner, ARCHES volunteer coordinator, at 503-399-9080 or kaylynn.gesner@mwvcaa.org.

Two volunteer orientations held last week drew about 40 people. United Way brought in a representative from Lava Mae to provide training.

Attendees learned best practices on how to operate and clean the mobile unit. Hospital-grade disinfectant will be used between each shower.

No date for the official launch has been announced. Houghton said he hopes to have the trailer fully operational by Aug. 1, when Mid-Valley Community Action Agency will be celebrating the opening of a new resource center in Mill City. Tours will be offered.

A portable ADA ramp still needs to be configured for the larger stall and hair and body wash dispensers mounted in all three showers.

Some of the operational details have yet to be ironed out, such as how the towels will be cleaned dai-

ly.

"We're trying to locate a laundering service that's willing to do that and give us a pretty good deal," Houghton said.

A pop-up tent will be positioned nearby as a grooming station with hair dryers and mirrors, again to maximize the number of people who can shower each day.

The trailer was on-site last week during the volunteer orientation, and Houghton offered a shower to a homeless man named Robert who happened to come by.

A couple of staffers also took showers to make sure the system was operating correctly.

And then it was Ray Boyd's turn. He had to wait a couple of hours while an electrical outlet was replaced but didn't mind. He'd already waited for two weeks and didn't have anywhere else to be.

Boyd suffered a stroke about six months ago and can no longer work as a finish carpenter, which is how he wound up homeless. He lives in his car with his dog Daisy, an Australian shepherd.

When it was time for his shower, Daisy accompanied him. Organizers say companion animals will be allowed in the stalls.

"That felt so good, and it was so refreshing," Boyd said afterward. "Not a lot of water pressure but still, there was a lot of hot water."

Before he left, Houghton arranged for him to meet with someone at the Salvation Army the next day to see about a shelter bed.

"Forward This" taps into the heart of the Mid-Valley — its people, history, and issues. Contact Capi Lynn at clynn@StatesmanJournal.com or 503-399-6710, or follow her on Twitter @CapiLynn and Facebook @CapiLynnSJ.