

SALEM COMMUNITY

Salem warming centers work to boost volunteer roster before winter

Last winter, volunteer shortages at times meant Salem churches couldn't open at night to shelter homeless guests. Warming center organizers are trying to get ahead of the need this year with a full-day training on Saturday and shorter shifts for volunteers.

By Rachel Alexander – Salem Reporter August 22, 2019
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Lead volunteer Russ Lipetsky directs warming center volunteers before opening at First Presbyterian Church on Feb. 27, 2019 (Rachel Alexander/Salem Reporter)

It will likely be months before Salem temperatures drop below freezing at night, but local churches and social workers are already planning how best to shelter homeless people from the cold.

A Saturday training at First Presbyterian Church will kick off an effort to recruit more volunteers for Salem's warming center network: three local churches that open their doors to homeless guests overnight in the winter months.

Those churches open any night between Nov. 1 and March 31 when overnight temperatures are forecasted below freezing.

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Volunteers lay out blue mats on the floor for sleeping and provide clean blankets, coffee, tea and broth to guests. They also check guests in and help label and store their belongings.

Sleeping spaces are co-ed, and anyone is welcome, including guests with pets.

Last year, 329 volunteers worked nights to shelter more than 900 homeless guests out of the cold. During the 42 nights when temperatures fell below freezing, volunteers put in more than 6,500 hours.

“Our church basement was never cleaner,” said Rob Thrasher, a minister at Salem First Presbyterian Church who coordinates community outreach, including the warming center network.



Mats cover the floor in the basement worship center at Salem's First Presbyterian Church. (Rachel Alexander/Salem Reporter)

The lifesaving work was at times chaotic. In previous years, warming centers have only opened when temperatures were 27 degrees or lower. Raising that number to 32 degrees meant churches were open far more nights, stretching volunteers and staff.

KayLynn Gesner, the volunteer outreach coordinator for ARCHES, which manages the shelter network, was hired in

the middle of the season and had to get up to speed while trying to make sure churches had volunteers.

“It was definitely hard,” Gesner said.

The three churches together can hold about 200 people a night. First Presbyterian is the largest, with space for 86.

Last winter, a lack of volunteers meant at times South Salem Friends Church or Church at the Park couldn't open for the night.

First Presbyterian, the largest of the three sites, remained open, but much of the work was done by a smaller group of volunteers who took on many shifts. Thrasher worked about half the nights the warming center was open, and several other members of the congregation took on as many as 24 shifts, he said.

Some nights, all three churches filled up. Thrasher said the warming center network is in talks with a fourth church that may join for the season to increase capacity.

Thrasher said he most enjoyed hearing stories from people staying at the church and learning about their lives, even when some swore at him because of untreated mental illnesses or personal problems.

“The scriptures always talk about caring for those on the margins,” he said. “It's about waking up, paying attention to the needs all around you, that we as a community can take care of one another.”

Gesner and other organizers have spent the past few months reaching out to other congregations and community groups about the need for volunteers. They've also re-written manuals and changed training to address feedback from last season.



Buddy, a two-year-old terrier chihuahua mix, greets first-time volunteer Sandy Gilstrap as owner Michael Spears looks on. (Rachel Alexander/Salem Reporter)

New volunteer training will now be held at the actual churches so volunteers can see where needed items are and get a better feel for how a typical night works.

“We’re hoping to not see so many scrambles to get volunteers because we’re doing that work now instead of in the middle of the season,” Gesner said.

An additional goal is to improve volunteer retention. Last year, more than four in ten volunteers did only one shift.

All shifts last year were at least four hours, which sometimes proved a barrier for volunteers. This year, they’ll use two and a half hour shifts to help with evening check-in, morning check-out and cleaning — the busiest times for the warming centers, said Ashley Hamilton, program director of ARCHES.

They’re optimistic the changes will make for a smoother shelter network this winter with more returning volunteers.

“Instead of going through a lot of growing pains, this time we have a chance to really serve our guests,” Gesner said.

Saturday’s training is an in-depth session geared toward volunteers seeking more skills to address guests’ needs, whether they’re first-timers or returning, Hamilton said. It will cover specific scenarios that came up last year, including what to do if a guest won’t leave the bathroom, as well as general help with de-escalating people who are upset or acting out.

Volunteers will also learn how to administer Narcan, a drug that can reverse opioid overdoses.

Training runs from 8:45 a.m. to 3:45 p.m. at First Presbyterian, with lunch provided. Volunteers are asked to RSVP so there’s enough food for everyone.

More general volunteer trainings will be held in the fall. More information and sign-ups are available on the warming_center website.

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