

HOMELESSNESS

Morning coffee service aims to reduce tensions between downtown homeless, business owners

As Salem citizens debate a "sit-lie" ordinance to ban daytime sleeping on public sidewalks, some volunteers and outreach workers have taken a different approach to downtown homelessness, serving coffee in an effort to get people up and moving before businesses open.

By Rachel Alexander — Salem Reporter September 5, 2019 at 12:11pm





Ken Houghton, homeless outreach coordinator for ARCHES, serves coffee to Joe Lopez on Sept. 4, 2019 in downtown Salem. (Rachel Alexander/Salem Reporter)

“Joe! You want some coffee?”

Ken Houghton spoke to a carefully constructed cardboard fort covering a bench on the corner of Commercial Street and Court Street in downtown Salem.

The cardboard rustled and then moved as Joe Lopez popped his head out, grinning. He’d been sleeping, but didn’t mind Houghton’s wake-up call. It was just after 7:30 a.m. as Lopez sipped his cup of coffee.

“I’m just down here until somebody wakes me up,” he said.

As Salem politicians, business owners and citizens debate a proposed “sit-lie” law, which would ban sitting and lying on public sidewalks during daytime hours, Houghton has taken another approach to the homeless people who regularly sleep downtown.

He’s the outreach coordinator at ARCHES and knows most of the community by name. In the spring, Houghton pulled together a regular volunteer group to start a new

offering he calls "room service" - walking around downtown Salem from about 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. to offer coffee and talk to the people who call the sidewalks and benches home.

"They start their day off with a warm greeting, smile and a cup of coffee," he said.

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Houghton describes the goal as hospitality, treating people who are often overlooked as human beings. But he also envisioned the effort as a way to reduce tensions between downtown business owners tired of finding people sleeping in their doorways or trash and human waste piled up when they open in the morning.

The idea wasn't new: Salem's Be Bold Street Ministries has been doing similar work for years, and Houghton and ARCHES volunteers partnered with them to learn about their efforts. Volunteers with both groups regularly go out with Houghton and others to offer a friendly face to people downtown.

When the effort began, Houghton said it was common to find 25 to 30 people sleeping downtown. Now, it's usually fewer than 10, either because people have moved to other places or are getting themselves up and moving before volunteers come around.

"I've had a number of them saying to me, 'Well, you guys got us in this habit of waking up early,'" said Pamela Watson, who's been a regular volunteer since the effort began.

Houghton has also talked to regulars about being good neighbors.

“We’re no longer finding the feces in the doorways,” he said. “That was one of the things we really wanted to address.”

Volunteers usually brew the coffee, but on Wednesdays, the downtown Starbucks donates two carriers of java. As they prepared Houghton’s order, the baristas said they’ve seen an impact over the past few months: fewer people leaving trash and waste on sidewalks.

Houghton doesn’t tell people to move or push them to wake up. He used to be homeless, in Salem, Portland and the Bay Area, and sports the shaved head and tattooed arms common to outreach workers who were once on the streets themselves.

READ: [Downtown stakeholders split on ordinance to restrict sitting, lying on sidewalks](#)

The people who sleep downtown tend to be those with disabilities or severe mental illnesses who aren’t capable of finding campsites on their own, or those at risk of attack, he said.

“With the lights and stuff, it’s safer. Even if they might get kicked, they might get spit on,” he said.

Instead, he simply offers coffee - sometimes once, sometimes two or three times as he makes his rounds - and reminds people of the time as 9 a.m. approaches and downtown starts to wake up. Some don’t want coffee. Some ramble or seem to speak more to themselves than Houghton.

He notes needs — who doesn’t have shoes, who says they’re hungry — and invites people to come get services at ARCHES.

“Come down and get a sack lunch later today,” he said to one man after a brief conversation. The man said he would.

Watson said she looks forward to her weekly rounds.

“It just really lifts your spirit. You get to know the people sleeping downtown, they get to know you. It’s so appreciated by everybody,” she said. Reactions are generally positive, she said - only once has a business owner gotten upset at her for giving a young woman a cup of coffee.



Joe Lopez, a homeless Salem resident, drinks a cup of coffee on the bench he regularly sleeps on. (Rachel Alexander/Salem Reporter)

Houghton circled back to Lopez’s bench a few times, refilling his cup and chatting as Lopez packed up his things on a bike.

Lopez said he hasn’t been homeless long. He was in the same apartment for almost 30 years until his landlord died and is on a list for housing, though he worries about finding a new place without a rental reference.

He used to sleep in the doorway of a jewelry store on the same corner with the owner's permission, but then the building passed to new ownership, who posted no trespassing signs. Since then, he's usually on the same bench.

"I don't want to break the law or nothing," he said.

After a third cup of coffee, Lopez was nearly packed up. He said he planned to head over to the park, where he often spends his days.

"I'm going to go feed the ducks," he said.

Correction: This article was updated Sept. 6 at 8 a.m. to better describe Be Bold's existing outreach efforts.

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