

## **IN THE SPOTLIGHT: FLORENCE AREA HOMELESS RESOURCES**

*by Tom & Stephanie Gonser, November, 2014*

*At the Florence United Methodist Church one morning we both heard comments about the needs of an increasing number of homeless individuals and families in the Florence area. Somehow it resonated with us, though it was not until a conversation at dinner that night we discovered we'd both found that topic something we could not just forget about. This article was first published in 2011 because we found no resource summarizing this information. And we've updated it here to reflect conditions as of November 2014. It's our hope that by helping to make Florence area residents more conversant with the community's efforts to deal with issues related to homelessness, and conditions leading to "at risk" of same, we can help in the effort to raise community awareness of this issue; and of opportunities to support local solutions.*

### **THE LOCAL SITUATION**

It would be helpful to quantify the scope of the homeless issue in Florence; but we've concluded that's simply not possible. There is no way to gather that information. There seems to be a consensus that the present number of homeless in our area is a three digit number, though hopefully at the low end of that range. This number does not take into consideration homeless individuals who are just passing through to destinations elsewhere. That said, even one homeless person or family would be unacceptably high; and it leaves us to contemplate the serious plight of persons that are facing the prospect of trying to survive outdoors — especially during our cold, windy and rainy winter months.

While each of the groups described below serves some aspect of the needs of the homeless, there is no facility in our area to provide overnight shelter (subject to the status of #5 below); or to serve as a central focal point for all services needed by homeless persons. While that is what may be required to provide the level of assistance needed, the costs and other practical obstacles associated with creating that level of relief are substantial; and at least for the moment this solution can only be viewed as a longer term objective. The nearest shelters on the coast with overnight accommodations are in Newport to the North, and Coos Bay to the south.

### **SUMMARY OF LOCAL SERVICES**

Though Florence currently has no permanent overnight shelter for homeless persons, the first four entities listed below offer a complementary and informally

coordinated range of services which provide a measure of relief. But more is needed. Without question the most effective way those of us in the community can help is through the support (volunteer and financial) of the local agencies that are doing their best to address the problem. Below we've outlined the essential role each plays. All would welcome your personal visit to get to know them better; and all could use whatever support you are able to offer, whether through the donation of goods, the contribution of dollars, or your direct participation as a volunteer.

- 1. Florence Food Share:** A familiar name to many local residents, but we suspect too many of us who live here have not taken the time to get to know them. While the primary mission is not directly focused on homeless issues, their services focus on providing food assistance to needy persons and families, including those that are homeless or "at risk" of becoming so. Moreover, their provision of food to support the hot lunch programs at the Helping Hands Coalition and the Florence United Methodist Church directly impacts a portion of the homeless community. From our discussions with the folks at Florence Food Share we came away with a much greater appreciation of the fact that while contributions of food constitute the lifeline of the organization, there is also a critical need for "unrestricted" direct financial support. Only 17% of funds donated goes to overhead costs. Dollars are critically needed to keep the operations going. And it's just more than paying the electric bill. Food Share is constantly dealing with costs associated with equipment maintenance. And while the vast majority of Food Share's operation is performed by volunteers, there is a small core of paid staff needed to coordinate and manage the effort. The bottom line is while food is always in short supply, when we can also give "unrestricted" dollars to this organization we're responding to the equally important challenge to support its continuing operations. Address: 2190 Spruce Street, Florence, OR 97439 Tel. 541.997.9110. Mailing address: P.O. Box 2514, Florence, 97439. Website: [www.florencefoodshare.org](http://www.florencefoodshare.org)
- 2. Helping Hands Coalition:** This non-profit organization is unique in being an all-volunteer group that has no paid employees. It provides the community's only "Day Center" operation for homeless individuals, and the focus is on immediate relief for the homeless. With hot lunches served on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, HHC complements the free lunch program offered by the Florence United Methodist Church on Tuesdays and Thursdays. They offer a place to be inside, in friendly and comfortable surroundings, during its hours of operation. With improved funding, and enhanced volunteer support, it would seem this project could further expand its hours of operation, and thus provide a greater day center opportunity for those in need. For persons who have no "home address", and are therefore denied the ability even to receive

social security and other payments due them, here they'll find their own "home address" where such items can be sent. Other services include emergency assistance with laundry, showers, food, clothing, and travel. Address: 1339 Rhododendron, Florence, OR 97439. Tel. (541) 997-5057. Website: [www.helpinghandsflorence.org](http://www.helpinghandsflorence.org)

3. **Free Lunch Program:** This project was started by the local United Methodist Church in 1995, using the kitchen and meeting facility adjacent to the church sanctuary on Kingwood. Over the years it has evolved into a community project with volunteers from a number of church and civic organizations, including Baha'i, Beloved Community, Florence Christian Church, Florence United Methodist Church, Kiwanis International, Presbyterian Church of the Siuslaw, St. Andrews Episcopal Church, St Mary, Our Lady of the Dunes Catholic Church, and Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. Hot lunches are served Tuesdays and Thursdays, and attract approximately 30-40 guests for each meal. The participating organizations typically host one lunch per month. This Program is presently in need of additional individuals and groups to help ensure it can continue this much needed community program. Persons or groups interested in volunteering can contact Yola Hesser at [geoyo@oregonfast.net](mailto:geoyo@oregonfast.net).
4. **Siuslaw Outreach Services:** This non-profit organization provides a range of community services designed to assist individuals and families to lead safe, dignified and secure lives. While many of the core programs are focused on addressing issues of domestic violence and women's issues, one facet of the programming deals with housing and homeless prevention services. Emergency aid vouchers are also available for a variety of immediate needs such as shelter, transportation, laundry, etc. In general SOS focuses its efforts on the "preventive" side of homelessness — addressing needs of persons deemed "at risk" of becoming homeless. There is also a focus on individuals who are viewed as having a reasonable chance at self-sufficiency through the granting of aid. SOS also uses a "case management" approach that includes opportunities for practical training on basic skills, such as parenting, finding employment, etc. Address: 1576 W 12th Street, Florence, OR 97439. Tel. (541) 997-2816. Website: [www.forencesos.org](http://www.forencesos.org)
5. **Florence Emergency Cold Weather Shelter:** With this update (11/2014) we report as well on a pending volunteer effort to create a new community resource in the form of a "warming center" for area homeless individuals, to be available during periods of severe inclement winter weather. A model for this project is the Egan Warming Center in Eugene. Suitable facilities and trained volunteers are needed to provide emergency shelter. Local churches an

community organizations have been asked to participate in the program. Persons representing broad segments of the community, including SOS, Helping Hands, local social service professionals, city officials, and concerned local residents are meeting to consider various options for creating this much needed additional community resource, and both a primary and backup facility have been tentatively identified as of this update. Further reports and contact information will be posted on the organization's website, which is [www.coldshelter.org](http://www.coldshelter.org)