



Annette Moreis volunteers at the Good Shepherd Parish Hall warming center, open Monday through Friday, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Ray Ewing

Volunteer Homeless Advocates Are Winter's First Responders

Louisa Hufstader Thursday, January 4, 2018 - 2:43pm

This winter's biting cold has been sharpest for the Vineyard's homeless population. Until Jan. 1, when the volunteer-powered Houses of Grace shelter system reopened for its third season, some Islanders spent their nights outside in frigid temperatures that by late December had dipped to the single digits.

"If I didn't have this, I'd be sleeping around a fire, bundled up," said Derek MacLeod, 32, who came to the shelter at St. Andrew's Church in Edgartown Tuesday night for a meal and a bed.

Mr. MacLeod told the Gazette he is a former heroin addict from an Island family that dates back to whaling days. He has been homeless on Martha's Vineyard for several years. "I've had multiple campsites in every town on this Island," he said.

And he's not alone. "I know multiple people like myself," Mr. MacLeod said. "I won't say 'tent city,' but over a dozen if I think about it."





Rev. Chip Seadale, of St. Andrew's Church, leads an overnight shelter at his church four nights a week. — Ray Ewing

Annette Moreis, who volunteers at the day warming center at Good Shepherd Parish in Oak Bluffs that also opened Jan. 1, agreed that chronic homelessness is nothing new on Martha's Vineyard.

"We have a tight-knit community," she said. "For years, it's been like this, but you know, everybody's just been hiding out."

Dave, another Islander with longtime local ties, hasn't had to sleep in the woods yet. But living with his mother has not been working out, so the clean-

cut 52-year-old slept on an air mattress at St. Andrew's Church on Tuesday and planned to bunk at St. Augustine's Church in Vineyard Haven the following night.

"Homelessness has been my biggest fear," said Dave, who preferred not to share his family name but said he was formerly a registered nurse with three college degrees who had suffered from a gambling addiction and depression.

Offering warm food and beds every night of the week, the Houses of Grace shelters at St. Andrew's (Tuesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday), the Federated Church in Edgartown (Monday and Thursday) and St. Augustine's (Wednesday) are open from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. Those seeking shelter have to be inside before 8 p.m. when the doors are locked for the night.

A meal is provided, usually delivered from the Island community supper of the day, and bedtime is 9 p.m., with a strict lights-out policy. Rising at 6:15 a.m., guests are served breakfast and given some food for the road before they must leave at 7 a.m.

For the other 12 hours of the day, homeless Islanders find warmth anywhere they can. The Steamship Authority lobby in Vineyard Haven opens early, town libraries are generally welcoming and volunteers have reopened the day warming center at Good Shepherd Parish in Oak Bluffs, offering hot food and drinks and access to an extensive workout facility in the parish basement every weekday from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

"We give them a hot meal, they sit and chat, use the bathroom, maybe do some laundry," said Ilona Metell, one of the volunteers staffing the warming center Wednesday.

Dalibor (Dali) Petrovic, a 30-year-old from Serbia, is spending his first winter on the Vineyard after his summer of work was torpedoed by a wrist injury. His landlord is allowing him to go into arrears on rent, Mr. Petrovic said. "I'm not able to go through this winter without a debt situation."

Although his wrist has recovered, Mr. Petrovic still has no employment and comes to Good Shepherd for "a hot meal in my tummy," he said cheerfully. He added that he hopes to get some work shoveling snow this week.



St. Augustine's Church hosts an overnight shelter on Wednesday nights and a community supper on Thursdays from 5 to 6:30 p.m. — Ray Ewing

Food and drink for the warming shelter are donated by local families and stores. The shelters don't serve beverages with caffeine. "It's a diuretic, and we need to keep fluids in them," Ms. Metell explained.

Hot cider has both warmth and sugar — and sugar is key to restoring the calories burned by cold bodies trying to stay warm, Ms. Metell said. Among the other most useful donated snacks, she said, are rolls of Lifesavers the guests can take along when they leave the shelter.



Les Holcomb, volunteer at Good Shepherd warming shelter. — Ray Ewing

If guests arrive with dangerously low body temperatures, warming shelter volunteers are ready to care for them. Dr. David Halsey of Martha's Vineyard Hospital recently trained the group on the signs of hypothermia and how to respond. One tip: don't force a freezing person to move around.

"He said if their temperature is too low, you can put them into cardiac arrest," Ms. Metell said.

With a body temperature above 97 degrees, guests — and volunteers as well — are free to use the Nautilus, weights and other exercise equipment at Good Shepherd. But anyone who's "not in a good state of mind," as Ms. Metell delicately put it, may be asked to refrain so as not to get injured.

States of mind can vary among shelter guests, because the day and overnight shelters do not automatically exclude those under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Instead, acceptance is based on a guest's behavior.

"They can come in whatever state they are in," Ms. Metell said. "As long as they don't disturb other people, they're welcome."

Rev. Vincent (Chip) Seadale, pastor at St. Andrew's and a founding leader of the Houses of Grace, said in the past two years only two people have been banned from the network for their behavior. "These decisions are hard for us," he said.

But being denied a bed doesn't mean that Island homeless advocates are giving up on someone. Reverend Seadale said he kept working with one of last year's banned guests until an appropriate facility on the mainland was found for the man, just this week.

Last year, Reverend Seadale said, the overnight shelters averaged 5 or 6 guests each night. "I see no reason to believe that will not be the case this year," said the pastor, who in 2017 oversaw the completion of a comfortable new basement complex in St. Andrew's parish house, created with shelter guests in mind.

The finished basement has shower and laundry facilities, colorfully painted walls, soft-surfaced insulated floors and dedicated sleeping rooms for men and women, separated by a corridor kitchen and half-glass doors.

While the rooms are also used for 12-step meetings and church groups, Rev. Seadale says the three months it operates as a shelter are by far the heaviest use of the space.

While the Houses of Grace are closed 12 hours a day and the day warming shelter is open just 15 hours a week, anyone with a bus pass can ride the VTA all day. But annual passes expired Monday, leaving some people without the means to get from the Houses of Grace — located in Edgartown six nights a week — to the Steamship Authority in Vineyard Haven or the day warming shelter in Oak Bluffs.

More passes, funded by a grant from the Farm Neck Association, were due to arrive at the warming shelter on Friday, said Dukes County's volunteer Associate Commissioner for Homeless Prevention, Karen Tewhey.



Volunteer Peter Vincent and Father Michael Nagle, pastor of Good Shepherd Parish. — Ray Ewing

The \$3,790 grant will also buy lunches, toiletries and laundry supplies, insulated blankets, clothing and cell phones and reimburse the parish for cleaning costs, Ms. Tewhey said.

A \$3,000 grant from the Permanent Endowment for Martha's Vineyard, boosted by \$1,000 from Dukes County, has already been spent to house eight people during late December's cold snap. Last year, a United Way grant provided \$20,000 for emergency housing, Ms. Tewhey said.

"That money carried us over until June and helped us provide shelter for some families that couldn't go to the Houses of Grace shelters," because they had small children, she said. "We're looking to come up with another funding source."

Foundation grants, business donations, individual contributions and volunteer staffs are what make the Island's shelter system possible — a precarious position for such an essential service.

"There is no funding on the Island for programs and services," Ms. Tewhey said. "Everything is on a volunteer basis."

Massachusetts is the lone state to mandate shelter for the homeless (New York city has a similar policy). But the commonwealth does not extend its "right to shelter" beyond families with children under 21 or pregnant women, and there are no municipal shelters on Martha's Vineyard.

"All-volunteer programs are not sustainable," said Ms. Tewhey, who also spearheads the MV Network on Homeless Prevention, about a dozen Islanders who have been meeting for the past two years.

"Our goal is to have a shelter here on the Island," she said. "It's ironic that there are four agencies sheltering homeless animals, and no shelter for homeless individuals."

The MV Network on Homeless Prevention holds its next meeting Jan. 25 from 1:30 p.m. to 3 p.m. at the County Commissioners Conference Room, 9 Airport road in Edgartown.

For information on how to donate funds contact Karen Tewhey at 978-273-0533/homelessprevention@dukescounty.org. Checks can also be made out to the County of Dukes County (Homeless Prevention in the memo line)), P.O. Box 190, Edgartown, MA 02539, or The

Permanent Endowment Fund (Island Clergy Emergency Homeless Fund in the memo line) P.O. Box 243 West Tisbury, MA 02575.

Warming Shelters

Oak Bluffs Fire Station, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Oak Bluffs Library, normal operating hours.

Chilmark Community Center and Town Hall, normal business hours.

Good Shepherd Parish Hall, 55 School street, Oak Bluffs, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., Monday through Friday.

Houses of Grace Overnight Shelters

Mondays: Edgartown Federated Church Parish Hall, 45 South Summer Street, Edgartown, 7 p.m. to 7 a.m.

Tuesdays: St. Andrew's Parish House basement, 51 Winter Street, Edgartown 7 p.m. to 7 a.m.

Wednesdays: St. Augustine Church, 56 Franklin Street, Vineyard Haven 7 p.m. to 7 a.m.

Thursdays: Edgartown Federated Church Parish Hall, 45 South Summer Street, Edgartown, 7 p.m. to 7 a.m.

Fridays: St. Andrew's Parish House basement, 51 Winter Street, Edgartown 7 p.m. to 7 a.m.

Saturdays: St. Andrew's Parish House basement, 51 Winter Street, Edgartown 7 p.m. to 7 a.m.

Sundays: St. Andrew's Parish House basement, 51 Winter Street, Edgartown 7 p.m. to 7 a.m.

Community Suppers

Mondays: St. Andrew's Church, 34 North Summer street, Edgartown, 5:30 p.m.

Tuesdays: Chilmark Church, 9 Menemsha Crossroad, Chilmark, 5:30 to 6:30 p.m.

Wednesdays: West Tisbury Congregational Church, 1051 State Road, West Tisbury 5:30 to 7 p.m.

Thursdays: St. Augustine, 56 Franklin Street, Vineyard Haven 5 to 6:30 p.m.

Fridays: Grace Episcopal Church, 36 Woodlawn Avenue, Vineyard Haven, 5 to 6 p.m.

Saturdays: United Methodist Church, 40 Trinity Park, Oak Bluffs, 5:30 p.m.

Sundays: Edgartown Federated Church, 45 South Summer Street, community luncheon from 12:30 to 2 p.m.



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