

The Stephen Center Provides more than a Shelter

By Amy Nielson

Winston, a U.S. Navy veteran, was living under a bridge near the north Omaha Metropolitan Community College campus until a campus security guard gave him some food and a bit of advice. The guard told Winston he should go to the Stephen Center.

When dawn came, Winston trekked the nearly 10-mile hike and waited outside the locked building for it to open. A staff member noticed him waiting and brought him inside for a hot cup of coffee.



Danny was an alcoholic who lived on the streets for 26 years. The cold weather and loneliness motivated him to seek shelter at the Stephen Center.

The Stephen Center helps many people, like Winston and Danny, overcome addiction and homelessness through its various programs and community connections that meet the ever-changing needs of the chronically homeless.

“A homeless shelter is never intended to be anything permanent,” says Dr. Carole Patrick, chief development officer for Stephen Center. “The goal is always to get someone back on his or her feet.”

Anyone staying at the shelter, transitional facilities or permanent supportive housing also has a number of life skills classes available to them that teach anger management, finance, parenting and leadership. Supportive groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon, are also available.

Programs

HERO Addiction Recovery is a program designed for low-income or homeless individuals looking to overcome addiction. Eight full-time licensed therapists work in the HERO

program, and an additional 20 clinical interns assist by leading groups and classes, Patrick says.

Families are also invited to help in the recovery process. "The role of families is significant because often addiction is tied to relationships," Patrick says. "Often times, relationships are torn apart because of addiction."

A holistic approach is used to overcome addiction, focusing on mind, body and spirit. In addition to life skills classes, all Stephen Center clients also have access to the Kroc Center, a community center sponsored by the Salvation Army. At the Kroc Center, clients can swim and exercise.

In addition to the HERO program, the Stephen Center also offers the Pettigrew Emergency Shelter for men, women and families. The Pettigrew Emergency Shelter is unique, in that



it is a sober facility. Everyone who stays is tested for drugs and alcohol and must remain sober to stay.

"For those who are in the process of trying to maintain their sobriety, it is a supportive and safe environment for them," Patrick says.

"A mom with two children is not going to be surrounded in any way by anyone who is using."

The Stephen Center also offers extensive case management for those seeking shelter. Patrick says case managers meet with clients within 72 hours of their arrival.

Case managers then identify the unique obstacles facing each client. Clients often need help finding a job, finding housing, obtaining legal identification or learning job skills.

Although the average stay at the emergency shelter is 27 days, there is no set time-frame on how long a person can stay. "As long as someone is working towards his or her goals, we are going to work alongside them," Patrick says.

Transitional living expands on the services Stephen Center provides. Many of clients who reside in one of the eight transitional apartments are graduates of the HERO program.

"They are done in their program and back out in the workforce," Patrick says, "But they don't quite feel secure in living totally on their own yet. They know they still need a support system surrounding them."

For clients who need longer than the average of one to two years spent in transitional living, Stephen Center offers Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) apartments.

Opened in January 2015, Stephen Center offers 62 PSH units that include single-room occupancy units (SRO), as well as one-, two- and three-bedroom units. Within three weeks of opening, all of the apartments were full, Patrick says.

Clients living in PSH apartments are still accountable to their case managers, Patrick says. If a case manager hasn't seen clients within a few days, someone will check on them to make sure they are safe and are getting what they need.

"We want them to have the goal of not needing the supportive services, not needing case management and living on their own independently and successfully," Patrick says.

Community Connections

Community partners within the Metro Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless (MACCH) help to support the clients at the Stephen Center.

"The Stephen Center works closely with the other area shelters, Open Door Mission and Sienna Francis House. It is not uncommon for all three area shelters to see the same individual over the course of a few months, Patrick says.

MACCH also includes organizations such as Community Alliance, Together, Lutheran Family Services and Visiting Nurses Association.

"We have space within our facilities where those community partners are here on a weekly basis," Patrick says. "There is a continuum of unique services provided across the city. And I believe it is supposed to be that way."

Stephen Center also receives 80 percent of its food donation from area supermarkets, including Trader Joe's, Whole Foods, Hy-Vee and Family Fare.

The kitchen staff at Stephen Center, which includes a former vice-president of catering from Hy-Vee and a former chef from French Café, is able to provide clients with an abundance of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Patrick says the quality of food provided to the clients help them feel "respected and cared for."

The Stephen Center also operates a thrift store to provide services to clients, as well as the entire Omaha community.

The thrift store provides opportunities for clients to complete community service and gain work skills or employment. Clients can also shop for needed items they might not otherwise have available.

"Some clients come in, literally, with just the clothes on their back," Patrick says.

"We send them to the thrift store with

vouchers; they do not pay a dime."

Some clients need a few days-worth of clothes, some need something to wear for a job interview and some children staying at the shelter may need school supplies. These items are provided at no-cost to all Stephen Center clients, Patrick says.

The evolution of homelessness

Patrick says she has seen a change in the type of people who become homeless in the 33 years since the Stephen Center opened.

"We see, more and more, people who are educated," Patrick says. "We see people who are employed."

Crises come in many forms, whether it is job loss, an illness or a family member's illness. Patrick says she sees people who are capable and have had the skills to live on their own, but they need support and help getting back on their feet after a crisis.

Mental illness is another common crisis found within the homeless community. "Close to 60 percent of the people who enter our shelter self-identify with some type of mental illness," Patrick says.

Success

When Winston and Danny arrived at the Stephen Center, they each began their own path to success, overcoming their own barriers.

Winston discovered that he was suffering from a mental illness and the Stephen Center



staff and community partners helped him to understand what was happening and how medications could help, Patrick says.

Winston is now employed at the Stephen Center as a security guard on the weekends, helping to give back to the community that has continually supported him.

Danny is now eight-years sober and living in a PSH apartment. At the Stephen Center, Danny found the sense family and community he was missing. He gives back to that community by providing transportation for clients needing to run various errands and in volunteering opportunities.

“They are giving back to the community that we have all established together,” Patrick says. “What more could you want.”

