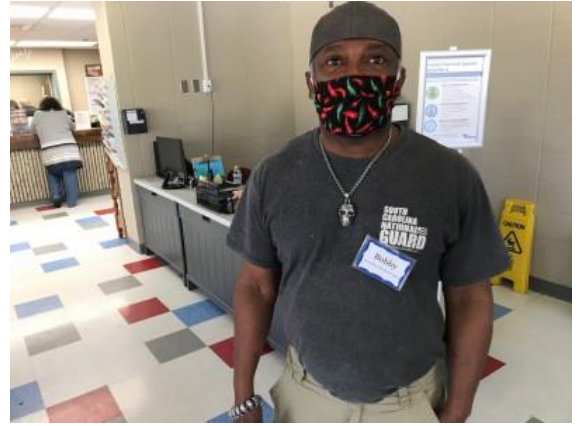


Spartanburg Opportunity Center brings innovative approach to challenges of homelessness

TUESDAY, APRIL 6

Facility helps fill gaps in services for City's homeless population



On a recent Friday afternoon, Stephanie Farmer was at her volunteer post inside the gymnasium of the City's former Northwest Recreation Center on Saxon Avenue, checking in homeless men and women who had come to use the facility's locker room showers and sinks.

The recreation facility, decommissioned since 2020, today is home to the Spartanburg Opportunity Center, and, in addition to washing off and brushing teeth, homeless community members come here to receive mail, enjoy snacks and get a break from harsh weather. There's also a laundry service and a closet where guests can select items of donated clothing, and heavy-duty plastic bins are available for storing personal belongings.

Farmer enjoys her volunteer work with the homeless. She explained: "I've been in their shoes. It reminds me of how far I've come."

Not long ago, Farmer was on the other side of things at the Spartanburg Opportunity Center. Following legal troubles and a bout with drug addiction, she found herself facing homelessness, living in a tent for a period of time. The center provided support for her, including case management services that enabled Farmer to secure housing.

"If it wasn't for this place, it wouldn't have happened," she said.

A new strategy takes shape

Complex and entrenched community challenges call for innovative, collaborative solutions.

So in 2018 and 2019, leaders in Spartanburg came together to discuss new avenues to address the multifaceted and growing issue of chronic homelessness. They considered the many struggles homeless people face—from day-to-day needs such as hygiene and adequate clothing to longer-range concerns including employment, healthcare and, of course, housing.

“Individuals experiencing homelessness have lots of barriers and challenges, so it takes all of us working together in order to alleviate those barriers,” said Hannah Jarrett, director of financial stability strategy with [United Way of the Piedmont](#).

Recognizing the many different dynamics at play in addressing homelessness, the United Way convened the Spartanburg Homeless Taskforce along with the City of Spartanburg, [OneSpartanburg, Inc.](#) and [Spartanburg Interfaith Hospitality Network \(SPIHN\)](#) to explore new, sustainable solutions for some of Spartanburg's most vulnerable residents.

An opportunity arises

Born of that collaboration, in 2019 the taskforce launched a pilot program aimed at helping the homeless: the Spartanburg Opportunity Center.

At the time, the City was preparing for the opening of the new Dr. T.K. Gregg Community Center, located on Howard Street. Plans involved relocating programs at the nearby Northwest Center to T.K. Gregg.

The newly freed space was then available to become home to the Spartanburg Opportunity Center, where homeless community members can visit on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. The center is managed by SPIHN, which has worked with other faith-based organizations to provide shelter and other support for homeless families since 2005.

SPIHN director Beth Rutherford said she was excited to take on leadership of the new center. “I knew it would be successful, based on dealings I had had with the chronic homeless,” she said.

“Unconditional love”

Basic services help homeless people get through the day, and case management helps to put them on a path to new opportunities. But as much as anything, Rutherford said, the center gives people a sense of self-esteem and hope.

“When you see someone come in who’s dirty and disheveled, and then they go into the clothing closet to get a new shirt or pair of pants, get a shower, and then they look totally different – that’s why we do this,” she said. “We’re giving people hope. They’re getting unconditional love. We have people say, ‘Thank you – no one’s ever cared about me so much.’”

Bobby Young, who has been intermittently homeless for several years, started visiting the Spartanburg Opportunity Center soon after it opened. Like Farmer, he decided to become a volunteer. “This place gives direction and hope,” he said. Case managers, Young said, provide basic but invaluable services – things like understanding government paperwork or filling out applications for food stamps. “A lot of people are at a standstill, and the center helps you move forward,” he said.

Rutherford is pleased that some who benefit from the program decide to give back by serving as volunteers. “To me, that’s a measure of our success – that they want to help out,” she said.

Potential to expand services

The Spartanburg area has seen its local homeless population grow over the years. Rutherford estimates that there are as many as 600 homeless residents in the county. Some stay in local shelters. Others rent hotel rooms when they can afford it or live in tent encampments on the outskirts of the city.

For its part, the City has taken an active role in addressing challenges associated with homelessness. For example, in 2020 the City created a new staff position: homeless outreach and education coordinator. Olivia McIntyre serves in the role, and, as she put it, “My office is the street.” She provides information to homeless people about community health resources, job opportunities, and relief services. She also works to coordinate and support community groups and volunteers who want to provide meals or clothing for the homeless.

Additionally, the [City’s Homeless Court](#), established in 2019, works with local law enforcement to encourage participants to receive and complete treatment and rehabilitation programs in exchange for the dismissal of the fines associated with a criminal offense and, in some cases, the dismissal of an offense.

Rutherford also credits the City for leasing space at the Northwest Center rent-free, with the organization responsible only for a portion of the cost of the property’s utilities and maintenance. She added that the City recently used federal COVID-19 relief funds to purchase new laundry machines for the center.

With continued support from the City and other partners, Rutherford believes there’s potential for the Spartanburg Opportunity Center to do even more for homeless residents. Plans call for the creation of a multi-use classroom to provide financial literacy, job training, life-skills development and cultural offerings.

Others are excited about the future of the Spartanburg Opportunity Center, too.

In a comment to local media, assistant city manager Mitch Kennedy said, "The collaborative spirit in our community answers the bell. We haven't solved the problem, but we have a broad group of stakeholders at the table bringing their resources, their services, and their manpower to address this issue."