

CHAMBER CHAT: Navigation Center provides needed resources

BY MEG MOSS May 1, 2021

The Salvation Army of Lee County, along with many other nonprofit organizations in Lee County, did not shut down during COVID-19. The Salvation Army continued to provide much-needed food, clothing, utility and rental assistance to people in our community. During the pandemic, they also continued their JOY program so that hundreds of local children would receive Christmas gifts.

In addition to all the regular assistance they are known to provide, The Salvation Army has been busy planning the opening of Sanford's first Navigation Center. What is a Navigation Center? Well, it's a day center of sorts for people who are experiencing homelessness. After a year or more of planning, the Navigation Center opened April 12 and they have already served over eighty people. The Center is located in the Bread of Life Ministries facility, and shows a great partnership of the two nonprofits. Also involved are Sanford's Outreach Missions, and the S3 Homelessness Task Force. The Taskforce has been a huge help in connecting the Navigation Center guests with the resources they need.

The Bread of Life currently provides an emergency overnight shelter and meals for vulnerable individuals and families. But the Navigation Center greatly expands upon those services. It meets the needs of people who would otherwise be exposed, unsheltered and/or in unsafe environments during the daytime hours five days a week. The Center is meeting the basic needs of the individuals.

While at the Navigation Center, individuals have access to restrooms, a hot shower, laundry facilities, use of a public phone, and the ability to enjoy a hot breakfast. In talking with Darla Shoults, the Navigation Center Director, she shared with me that the hot breakfast is one of the biggest draws for people to come in to the Center. "We're only a few weeks in to this program, and people are lined up at 8:45 am for a nine o'clock start time. Word has definitely gotten out that we are here to help. We believe that a healthy, hot breakfast is the best way to start your day and we are committed to making sure that everyone who wants a hot breakfast has one."

But breakfast is just the first step in the process of helping. The staff and volunteers at the Navigation Center sit and have breakfast with the people they are serving. "We are getting to know them as individuals and families and finding out what their needs are" stated Shoults. "There is a layered tragedy of how homelessness affects children, adults and families. We're here to help."

And people are helping each other, too. On Shoults' personal Facebook page, she recently shared a story of something she witnessed at the Navigation Center. "A father with two very young children popped his head in for just a few seconds needing some bottles of water. I have no doubt this family is homeless and as a mother it was very hard to see these two babies in that situation. I was in the process of helping another center guest and wasn't able to step away until after this family made their way down the corner and disappeared. A few minutes later a woman who I know to be homeless and in a very difficult situation came inside to give me five dollars to give to the young family. She wanted to give everything she had to her name. She asked me to try and track them down, or to take her with me to find them so they could have it. She kept going on about how she knew that while it was all she had and it wasn't going to make a big difference for them long term, hopefully the Dad could buy his babies a happy meal with her money and for tonight that might be enough...."

Shoults also shared with me that “while we know we can’t completely fix the homelessness and poverty problem, we can help lessen the burden of those experiencing these issues.”

If you are interested in donating breakfast items or in volunteering, please contact Shoults at Darla.molina@uss.salvationarmy.org.