

Day shelter gives homeless a place to go

By Jasmine Gallup jgallup@sanfordherald.com Jun 16, 2021

Darla Leigh, program coordinator for the new Salvation Army of Lee County Navigation Center, addresses a crowd during the center's ribbon-cutting Tuesday.

A new day center for the homeless, three years in the making, opened earlier this year.

The Salvation Army of Lee County Navigation Center is a place for people to go "so they're not out and exposed during those daytime hours," said Program Coordinator Darla Leigh after the official ribbon-cutting Tuesday.

With showers, laundry machines and hot meals, the center can help people experiencing homelessness get back on their feet.

"They really can come and just rest if they need to," Leigh said. "I think it helps restore some dignity. Homelessness is a traumatizing experience. When you experience trauma, you can endure a lot of shame and the loss of dignity.

"What we're hoping to restore here is that sense of dignity and meaning and purpose and value. And that really is just as simple as allowing somebody to shower. It changes your whole day. It changes how you feel about yourself, how you carry yourself."

Since the center opened April 12, it's served more than 600 people, according to Leigh. Open from 9 a.m.-2 p.m., the center offers hot breakfast each day and is home to public restrooms, computers with free wifi and charging stations for phones.

In addition to providing short-term help, the center is also a one-stop-shop for local resources like case management, medical care through the H3 street medicine program, rapid re-housing, and peer support from FirstHealth.

Leigh hopes to offer access to even more resources from local nonprofits in the future, she said.

"Homelessness and poverty are exhausting experiences," Leigh said. "So, if we can keep them here and bring agencies to them, we really help alleviate some strain of what they're already going through."

Salvation Army Director Tracy Staley agreed, saying she anticipates that nonprofits like Brick Capital Community Development Corporation and Daymark Recovery Services may offer services in the future.

"The dream is that eventually Mondays would be veteran's services and Tuesdays would be social services," Staley said. "Transportation is a huge issue in our county. So, get everybody in the same place where these people can see them."

Located at 219 Maple Ave., the center also shares space with Bread of Life Ministries. The two agencies are working together to continue to provide shelter during off-hours in case of extreme weather, Staley said.

During the summer, high temperatures will keep the shelter's doors open in the afternoon and on weekends. During the winter, overnight shelter will be available.

“We couldn’t do it without them, because they have the most important thing, which is the building,” said Staley. “We have the staffing, we have the programming, but we didn’t have anywhere to go.”

The center is “desperately needed,” Leigh added.

“It’s been a two- or three-year conversation between nonprofits in the area, S3, the city, and everyone was in agreement that this is necessary, they just were trying to figure out how to make it happen,” she said. “This is something completely new and different.”



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