

9/5/2023

Mayor Preedin, City Council and Staff,

Sisters has had a houseless problem since before SCWS was an entity. In 2016 a group of citizens became aware of houseless children living in the forest. A meeting was called to brainstorm ways to address this problem. When the faith community joined the conversation, the group became passionate about opening an emergency winter shelter.

Just weeks before the scheduled January 1st opening, Edward Fones, who was sleeping in his car near his place of employment, froze to death. This avoidable tragedy underscored the critical situation faced by many of our houseless neighbors.

From the beginning, Shepherd's House Ministries stepped in to provide training, supplies and overnight staff for our shelter. Once we opened, many in the community volunteered to monitor the guests and serve meals provided by the community. The volunteer monitors shared an evening meal with the guests and enjoyed good conversations with them. After the meal, the guests were typically so exhausted from bearing the cold and extremes of their lives that they immediately curled up in their beds and fell asleep.

For four years local churches hosted the Shelter on a rotating basis during the winter season and we continued to be supported by Shepherd's House and over 100 community volunteers. We were unable to operate during the COVID pandemic. After the pandemic, we operated with two churches and a rented space on Main St. for the remainder of the season. The following year, for various reasons, only one church was available. We searched rentals, but the limited number of open locations were unwilling to rent to us. At this point it was clear that to provide emergency shelter we would need to purchase a building.

SCWS has been meeting with the city over the last several years regarding our efforts to site a building for our operations. In fact, some representatives of the city participated in coordinated efforts to strategize and plan for exactly this. In anticipation of the Executive Order funding, a community roundtable was formed to brainstorm possible projects.

The group requested that SCWS apply for the grant on behalf of our town. This is because we were the only nonprofit with the experience and qualifications that could meet the grant criteria. Fortunately, we were awarded a 1.4-million-dollar grant to put the plan into action. We have the funding and a suitable building with a willing seller that meets the needs in our community. And we now stand before you, the city council, with this opportunity.

Our current proposal provides for much the same services as we have provided in the past. Only now SCWS will have a building of its own to operate more efficiently. We will have a consistent shelter space, a dedicated office and storage for supplies used in our daily outreach to the underserved community. In addition, we plan to make showers and laundry available to our guests.

We are made up of seasoned volunteers. Most of us have spent countless hours and resources while building trust with our unhoused neighbors. We recently hired our first half-time employee to help coordinate with partnering agencies like NeighborImpact, Deschutes County Behavioral Health, Shepherd's House, Coordinated Houseless Response Office, Central Oregon's Intergovernmental Council, Wellhouse Food Bank and Habitat Restore.

The current grant award will provide funding for two staff members to run our operations. Again, a tremendous gift to SCWS and the town of Sisters in providing for the needs of our houseless population. SCWS is almost always the first call from churches and authorities looking for assistance for marginalized individuals seeking help. We've assisted many with needed supplies and services. Many times, SCWS has even provided fuel and direct transportation out of Sisters for individuals who requested it.

SCWS has built steady and consistent relationships with many of our forest friends. We are confident that these interactions provide hope and a level of safety to the community. Our relationships and resources are discreetly executed, and I believe that is why so few truly know of the efforts of the terrific army of Sisters Cold Weather Shelter volunteers. We are encouraged by recent reports from several former guests relating how they have improved their living and employment situations.

Sisters Cold Weather Shelter meets all the qualifications outlined in HB 2006 as amended. The staff report does not indicate any glaring deficiencies with our application.

We agree to the four staff recommended conditions of approval as presented.

There are three questions that the staff asked for determination by the City Council.

1. Is there adequate transportation to commercial and medical facilities?

The staff detailed the distance to commercial and medical facilities in their report. The services available to our shelter will be the same as for all community members. We feel this is adequate.

2. Operational Experience

a) Does SCWS have two years' experience operating an emergency shelter using best practices?

Yes. SCWS functioned under the umbrella of Shepherd's House starting in 2017 as confirmed by John Ryan, Director of Shepherd's House. The Shepherd's House provided best practice training and advice, as well as staffing. SCWS continues to utilize best practices when operating the shelter and interacting with our guests.

SCWS operated for five seasons. For the intent of HB 2006, we feel this is more than the equivalent of two years.

The Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council (COIC) has awarded a sizable grant to the Sisters Cold Weather Shelter to purchase the shelter building. They have vetted our organization and have confidence that we will operate in a safe and professional manner. COIC has also pledged to provide technical assistance as needed.

b) Has SCWS has been tax exempt during the request period?

Yes. We've been a nonprofit since August 12, 2020, meeting the 3 years required.

c) If the intent is to "establish partnership..."

The SCWS does not intend to establish a partnership as we meet both of the criteria above.

3. Will the shelter pose any "unreasonable" risks to health and safety?

No. The shelter has not and does not pose any unreasonable risks to health and safety. The testimony by the authorities at our last council meeting confirmed this. We believe that having a dedicated shelter will make our community safer. Providing a place where our most vulnerable neighbors can rest and obtain access to services will create a sense of community and save lives.

At the shelter unacceptable behavior, while uncommon, was dealt with promptly per best practices and our code of conduct.

We were pleased to read of the sidewalk improvements being planned by the city. This will provide an even safer corridor for everyone.

In closing we are confident that we meet all the criteria for siting under HB2006 and look forward to the council's approval so that we can begin planning for the winter season.

