

Grapevine Independent

CHURCHES CONCLUDE FOUR-WEEK WINTER SHELTER

RANCHO CORDOVA, CA (MPG) - The Interfaith Rotating Winter Shelter of Rancho Cordova is all about the people being served. Dono Mitchell (65) is a Vietnam veteran and was a welder for 25 years; he has been homeless for three years. "This is a top-of-the-list program," Mitchell said. "They get into your spiritual part. They want to know what you're doing. A lot of places don't care."

Mitchell said that it has been difficult for him to stay in one place, but he's not getting any younger. "Although the program stops tomorrow, it's not going to get any warmer," Mitchell said. "It's just the beginning of winter, so I don't know what I'm going to do."

The program began on schedule and ran for four weeks, providing food, comfort, and shelter from the cold for some of the local homeless and overcoming several challenges including being without a central intake site. Undeterred from their goal, the group processed their guests each day at the host sites. Inez Reyes of St. John Vianney Catholic Church and Fay Kerekes of United Methodist Church of Rancho Cordova handled the evening intake every day of the program, helped by Nan Traud of Sun River Church, and others, working at the different sites each week.

Karen Edwards of Sun River Church, one of the main organizers and promoters of the program, said that having a central intake site would have provided a stable location for patrons to gather and a set time for beginning and ending each day's shelter. It would also have avoided the confusion of the patrons about where to go each week.

"I really believe we cannot operate next year without an intake site," said Edwards.

The program was able to cover only four of the eight weeks they had planned, with only four churches volunteering to be host sites: St. John Vianney Catholic Church, Cordova Neighborhood Church, Sun River Church, and Cordova Church of Christ. However, the group hopes to increase the span of time covered next year.

"There are 50-something congregations in the Rancho Cordova area," said Larry Stafford, associate minister specializing in outreach and involvement for Cordova Church of Christ. "Right here on Coloma Road we have 12, so we should be able to make very good inroads on the problem."

Stafford invited other church leaders to visit the host sites and see how smoothly the process actually was. "It's real easy to just turn the other way," Stafford said. "But when you're face to face with somebody, you've got to deal with them as a human being."

Without winter shelter, options are very limited for those on the streets. Howard and Cheryle Hicks of Rancho Cordova are both 57 and have been homeless for around three months; they were grateful for the nights they were able to spend in the shelter. "Without it," Howard Hicks said, "you just keep moving. Or you freeze like a popsicle."

Every person's situation is different. Five years ago, Kim Swope (35) was making \$80,000 a year. "I have a Bachelor's degree," Swope said. "I was a normal, functioning member of society just like everybody else. But my daughter ran away and I had a breakdown, and I lost everything."

Now she is struggling to get back everything she lost. "It's been eye opening, and a humbling experience that I needed to go through," Swope said. "This is my first time in this experience. I'm like a fish out of water."

Some of the homeless have been able to receive counseling and find resources while at the shelter. "Sacramento Self-Help Housing came to our place one night and they found aid for one person and housing for three others," said Mike Mitchum, pastor at Cordova Neighborhood Church. "That was a highlight. And to be able to perhaps provide more resources for them, I think I would like to see that happen next year."

Volunteers responded enthusiastically at every shelter host site. Claudia Beigel, parish coordinator for St. John Vianney host site, said she was pleased with the response. "So many people came forward to volunteer and to give money, to give of their time," Beigel said. "I'm looking forward to doing it next year."

With all its challenges and difficulties, organizers, volunteers, and guests all feel the effort was worth it. "I think that we were able to connect with some of the homeless population in Rancho and have conversations, make them feel not invisible," Edwards said. "We did a little good and we may never know how far it goes. We were one link in their chain back to getting on their feet. So yes, it was, I think, totally, totally worth it."



Inez Reyes of St. John Vianney Catholic Church and Fay Kerekes of United Methodist Church of Rancho Cordova, and others, provided intake processing during the four weeks of shelter at Rancho Cordova host churches.

Photo by Margaret Snider