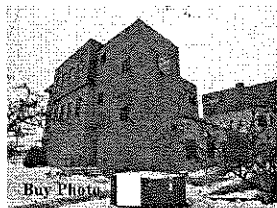


# Night shelter already looking toward next year

McLean Bennett, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin 1:29 p.m. CT Feb. 25, 2017



(Photo: Gary C. Klein/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

SHEBOYGAN - Ken Rishel still remembers when he woke up about a year ago — it was a cold February morning — and realized how blessed he was to step out of a warm bed inside a warm house.

He knew there were people in Sheboygan who didn't share those luxuries. So he brought an idea to the church council he presides over at St. John's United Church of Christ: the city needed a nighttime warming shelter where local homeless could sleep under a ceiling instead of a highway overpass.

"That's really how it all started," he said. "It was one of our meetings last February when the weather was ungodly cold."

He eventually got in touch with Daryl Mangeri, a lieutenant and leader with the local Salvation Army branch. Together, they and others helped spearhead an initiative to open a temporary nighttime shelter inside the downtown Salvation Army headquarters — a place where locals could, for at least a few hours each night, escape Wisconsin's winter and catch some warm Z's.

That shelter has capped off its first season, and Rishel and Mangeri said they're both looking now for ways to improve on the initiative next year.

They want to run it longer, opening as early as December and operating through February. They'll need more volunteers to do that, though, so they're planning to expand recruitment efforts. And they want to try reaching out to more homeless people to fill more of the cots in the Salvation Army's basement.

Rishel said the city has seen efforts in the past to launch a nighttime shelter during the winter. Those attempts, though, have usually fizzled, but he said volunteers from area churches who pitched in to help with this year's shelter appear excited about keeping their current initiative going. And that has Rishel hopeful for the downtown shelter's future.

"We knew that we were doing the right thing," he said of the effort to offer locals a needed service. "It was a lot of people that spent a lot of hours going through procedures and a lot of prayer — a lot of prayer."

## Organizers battled setbacks

Organizers originally wanted to open the shelter this year on New Year's Day, but delays in getting volunteers trained to help oversee it each night pushed the opening back by more than a week.

They had also wanted to run the shelter through February — or through at least as much of the month as possible. But with only a few volunteers on hand, and with the threat of volunteer burnout, Rishel said the shelter decided to close its doors at the end of January.

Beckoning people to occupy one of the Salvation Army basement's cots also proved a challenge. The shelter, which had enough space for about 25 occupants each night and served dinners and breakfasts, sat empty some evenings.

"For the first seven days, we had nobody show up," Rishel said.

But, then, people started coming. Not many. Mangeri said the most the shelter ever housed was four people. But some showed up multiple times, a sign the shelter was meeting an important need.

Guests were treated to a meal at night — normally a "hearty soup," Mangeri said — and a breakfast in the morning. In between meals, they slept on cots while volunteers watched over everything.

"It's a growth process," Mangeri said, noting organizers are now looking for ways to help the shelter run longer and with more guests next year.

"We have looked at next year splitting up the shifts, which means we'll need more volunteers," he explained, noting asking people to sign up to watch over the shelter for shorter periods of time might make volunteering more "palatable."

## Targeting the truly homeless

Rishel said he knows homelessness is a problem in Sheboygan. People live out of their cars or outdoors, and surveys he's seen — even unofficial ones — have done enough to prove it.

But finding a way to beckon those people into the doors of a shelter have proved harder than expected. Many of the guests who visited the shelter each night this year weren't genuinely homeless, Rishel said. Rather than trying to escape makeshift homes under overpasses or in their vehicles, many staying overnight at the Salvation Army this winter had instead apparently overstayed welcomes on friends' or family members' couches.

"I don't know if we ever really touched the true homeless," Rishel said.

That was OK, and Rishel said the volunteers were happy to be helping whoever needed the shelter's services. But he said he knows there are people in the area he wants his shelter to reach.

The problem, he said, is that homeless people don't read the newspaper and they're not on Facebook. That leaves them with few ways to learn about the existence of a downtown night shelter.

"How do we get out and try to get to those homeless?" Rishel said, echoing a question he said has come up frequently as volunteers and organizers with the shelter have tried wrestling with how to reach their target audience.

## Stepping up recruitment

Rishel said he and others are looking to bring in more volunteers to help expand the shelter's offerings next year.

Most of the volunteers this year came from a handful of area churches. It made for a welcome bit of ecumenical and cross-denominational work, said Rishel, who recalled friendly conversations he carried late into the night with members of other churches this winter.

But homelessness is everyone's issue, he said.

"It's not just the churches," he explained. "You don't have to belong to a church to care about people."

That means the shelter could expand its search in the future to find volunteers, possibly to area service organizations like the Elks Club.

"The more people we get participating," he said, "the more we can stretch this out."

Volunteers are planning a seasonal close-out meeting early next month to review the shelter's first winter and begin discussing next year's efforts. Rishel said that meeting, planned for 6 p.m. on March 2 inside the downtown Salvation Army building in Sheboygan, is open to anyone interested in volunteering next year.

"We are definitely going to be back and we're definitely going to have a warming shelter and we're definitely going to help as many people as we can," he said, noting he's "absolutely" certain efforts to launch a shelter again next year will pick up steam.

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## IF YOU GO

**What:** Salvation Army winter shelter meeting

**When:** 6 p.m. March 2

**Where:** Salvation Army headquarters, 710 Pennsylvania Avenue.

**Synopsis:** Meeting will review the first season of a downtown night winter shelter. Organizers say potential future volunteers are welcome

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