

The Bridge Shelter at Eagle Ridge Bible Fellowship Church – October 2018

We were so blessed to be able to hold the Bridge Shelter in our church for the month of Oct. We had done this 3 years ago but our coordinator for that time had since moved from our church and so new people set up and coordinated ERBF's part of it. Our church family embraced this endeavour and donations of clothing came in almost on a daily basis all month long. Word of mouth brought in donations from friends of friends. One woman brought in an entire box full of little shampoo and lotion bottles and soaps from hotels. One day 10 large black hooded and lined sweatshirts showed up. A dentist donated toothbrushes. Warm coats, backpacks, blankets showed up. A big box of men's dress shirts (not appropriate for this group) was passed on to the Hope for Freedom recovery House in Port Coquitlam.

One day a woman from our church came in and asked if there was any clothing we needed. I had noticed the night before that some of our guests were asking for sweatpants or pajama pants to sleep in and I told her. Two days later there was a bag of pajama pants. She had gone to Value Village and bought a whole bunch. One day I had spent a couple of hours sorting clothes, putting them out on tables, and filling up boxes with toothbrushes, shampoos and lotions. I had cleaned up everything and was feeling like we were well stocked with everything except washcloths. I was about to leave, feeling maybe I should run down to the store and buy some but stood a few minutes talking to a friend in the lobby. While I was talking, someone had quietly come in the church and put a bag of stuff in the donation box. I turned to head out and saw the bag – full of washcloths.

Food was donated and bought; meals (breakfast, dinner and bag lunches) were prepared, some at home and brought in, some on site. Volunteers – cooking, serving, cleaning and connecting with guests, received more than they gave. We got to know members of our church better but also had people from our neighbourhood and other churches volunteer and work side by side with us. And our guests were gracious, thankful and polite and it was enjoyable to chat and spend some time with them. The Hope for Freedom staff were caring, committed individuals who related to our guests and understood their needs.

One evening I was putting out donated clothing with one of the Hope for Freedom staff and came across a shirt covered in sequins and bling. I said something about what kind of homeless person wants to wear this kind of bling, they just want and need warm clothes and was going to pack it away. She said to me, "Oh no, leave it out; that's going to go first." I said "Really? I'm going to hang this up in front and time it, see if anyone even looks at it." Sure enough, first guy through the door heads straight over and grabs it off the hanger and says, "Awesome, gotta have this!" and goes to put it on. Staff that can connect and know their clients is why this group works so well at getting people off the street and meeting their needs.

Before we had hosted the Bridge shelter, I had run into a couple who were camped under a tarp in a local park. I got talking to one of them and asked whether they knew about the housing on Gordon Ave. I was told that they had tried but they couldn't get in. They were under the impression that only drug users were able to use it and that it was dangerous – needles lying around, fights, and not safe for someone just homeless. They also thought that drug users were being brought in and that was one of the reasons it was full. They were on a couch, under a tarp in a park instead. This couple showed up on one of the first nights we opened and were there all month and I know they felt safe sleeping inside our church.

Working at the church this last Oct. has made me more aware of people on the streets. I ran into one of the guests from the shelter at the mall one day. I walked over, said hi and started to talk with him for a while. The next day I got an e-mail from one of the volunteers that had worked that evening relaying how pleased he was that a volunteer had talked to him and remembered him. So important that people who are homeless are thought of as 'people' not 'homeless' or 'problems'.

As some of the guests got more comfortable they tried to give back. They picked up the mats and set their stuff up as they came in and if we were still setting up tables and chairs we could get offers to help. We said a prayer before dinner each night and one evening one of the guests ask to say grace and said a heartfelt prayer full of gratitude for this small amount of our abundance that we shared with him. It is humbling when we have so much, and see someone with so little, appreciate it and give thanks for it. As I said, we got so much more out of this month than we gave.

Needs to be addressed if possible: It would be beneficial to be able to do laundry for guests. We went through a lot of washcloths, towels, and socks because they were taking clean ones every day. I did offer to wash towels and washcloths with our church laundry and some people took me up on this and that helped to not buy so many washcloths. It was good that the shelter staff pulled the socks, gloves and underwear and kept them at their table to dole out one at a time so they didn't disappear so quickly. Next time I would include toothbrushes. We went through about 80 in the first two weeks and there were only about 10 guests a night, many of them returning guests.

We started out with 5 guests the first night and averaged from 10 – 15 guests later in the month with 17 guests as our highest number. As we took the month of October and it was a lovely, warm month, we expected lower numbers. As it gets colder, I'm sure it will increase.

We appreciate that Hope for Freedom runs this program and have enjoyed working with them and hope that they will continue as there is a definite need for this community support.

Debbie Fell