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The Warming Place: Help for Nantucket’s “forgotten folks”

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(back row, l-r) Pastor Derek Worthington, Deb DuBois, Mark White, Zahra Zasza (front row, l-r) Carol Benchlet, Peter Mackay, Ann Perkins. Not in photo: Vin Debaggis, Elise Norton, and Sue Mynttinen.

Photo by John Stanton

Editor's Note: This is part two of a two-part series on efforts to provide overnight shelter for the island's homeless. **[Click here for part one.](#)**

(Nov. 2, 2023) When he worked in social services at Nantucket Cottage Hospital, Peter MacKay kept boat tickets on his desk.

Sometimes the only thing he could do to help somebody who was homeless and needed help was to hand them a ticket and call over to make sure the homeless shelter in Hyannis was expecting them.

It was not a choice that made anybody happy, but it was the only choice. Nothing has really changed since those days.

While the team behind the Warming Place works to expand its services from daytime food and coffee to overnight shelters at several island churches, the long view is to build a permanent shelter on-island.

"The goal to me is to get a shelter, to provide safe housing in the winter months for those people who don't have it," MacKay said. "It will start out small and as word spreads of the safety and cleanliness of it more people will come, because I know there are more people out there."

"But if you do not have a place to stay and no family and friends willing to help, the most that can be done is a ticket to Hyannis. That's frustrating for both the homeless and the people whose job it is to serve them."

The Warming Place will open its daytime center Monday, Nov. 6 from 10 a.m.-1 p.m.

No date has been set for the opening of an overnight shelter at any of the churches that have agreed to provide space. The hope is to open by mid-November.

There are 10 people in the core group of the Warming Center. The short-term goal is to find overnight shelter, seven days a week for Nantucket's homeless. There are about 20 volunteers who help set up and serve the food. The Nantucket Food Pantry helps with prepared meals, several restaurants help out the same way, Shop & Stop gift cards are given out, and volunteers shop for perishables like coffee, cream and bananas.

The first overnight stays were provided by Cliff Lodge. By the second season there were 240 overnight stays needed and the Warming Place could not find another hotel to help. They began to look at churches for assistance.

During the days when MacKay was handing out boat tickets and finding people beds in a Hyannis shelter, St. Paul's Episcopal Church could sometimes be counted on. Now it is the Summer Street Church, a non-denominational Christian church, which offered space for the day program and is now working with the group to offer overnight shelter.

There is no proselytizing to people seeking shelter. The Warming Place is a secular program, but the church's decision to provide a place is clearly a faith-based initiative.

"It is very much part and parcel of being people of faith," Pastor Derek Worthington said of the church allowing its basement to be used to help the Warming Place. "Love your neighbor as yourself. We take that seriously."

"Our neighbor isn't just the person we have something in common with or engage with in our social life. Our neighbor is anybody who is a part of this community. Nantucket is a beautiful community that includes all kinds of people and some of those people are those forgotten folks."

He said the problem is that often we tend to see people in need of help as an issue instead of as people.

“That distances us from what is actually going on,” he said. “Distancing ourselves makes it easier and easier to look away, easier to allow the discussion about human beings to devolve into politics. But we’re talking about our brothers and sisters.”

Carol Benchley has been working to line up several other island churches to work with to create overnight shelters, for one or two nights a week. The goal is to add them all up to seven nights.

“It comes down to space. If we don’t have a place to put the cots, then we don’t have the night shelter,” she said.

“The Summer Street Church has offered three nights, which is great. Obviously, we need volunteers to help run it. Without staff we can’t run it. But it is really hard to push for that without knowing we have a place to put the cots.”

Along with the Summer Street Church, Benchley is working to try to find a way for the Unitarian Church to provide one night and the Methodist Church has already agreed to provide two. There is a long list of requirements, and she is now dealing with questions of what will be needed to pass public health and fire inspections.

The plan is to have overnight, trained staff members, each working three nights at \$25 per hour. They are looking for six staffers in all, who will set up, make sure safety protocol is followed, wake people up in the morning and clean the church and get it ready for the day program.

They would report to Janice Carreiro, executive director of the food, fuel and rental assistance program, who will provide the business infrastructure.

Funding has come in small amounts so far, although the Warming Center has received grants from ReMain Nantucket and The Rotary Club to hire a strategic developer.

Last month it initiated its first island-wide appeal. Marine Home Center has made a donation to the cause. Early on support came from longtime summer residents Nancy Seaman and Alan Swartz, both financially and with guidance on how to help individuals experiencing homelessness: provide sleeping bags, Stop & Shop gift cards, etc.

Fairwinds, The Seconds Shop, The Family Resource Center, Nantucket Community School and the Community Foundation for Nantucket have also offered support.

The long-range plan is still to find a permanent home, a permanent shelter. The plan is to keep islanders safe and warm on the island and to no longer need that stack of boat tickets.

DuBois said the Harbor Homes shelter in Martha's Vineyard is a good example of what might work here. It has been operating successfully for 10 seasons. Warming Place members visited and learned about the policies and procedures that keep Harbor Home running.

Building and staffing a permanent shelter would probably be a three- to fiveyear plan, she said, "but if somebody gave us a place tomorrow it would happen real fast."

The biggest challenge will be to raise enough money to make the project work, to find an appropriate building for dorm-style rooms. Dubois understands that there will be people against a shelter simply because it is in their neighborhood, but so far has not heard any NIMBYism.

"I think it (a permanent shelter) should be a huge community effort with churches and town and private funding and recognize this as a community issue and work to solve it," she said.

"The Vineyard has done a great job with this. They've been doing it for 10 years. They have houses and centers. It's very impressive what they have done. And if they can do it, I don't know why we can't do it."

To help the Warming Place, call [\(774\) 325-8970](tel:7743258970).