

## Action Update- March 23

# Hood River Valley Disciples Say Yes To Serving Neighbors



*Eleven years ago, an unhoused person died of exposure on the streets of Hood River, Oregon. Local clergy got together and vowed that they were not going to let it happen again.*

Together with other community partners, they created the Hood River Warming Center, which offered nightly refuge to neighbors during the cold

winter months. In addition to a warm place to sleep, guests receive a hot meal--provided by a network of local restaurant partners--and a place of refuge. They find a community and sense of sanctuary that provides warmth in more ways than one.

The ministry originally launched under the umbrella of Gorge Ecumenical Ministries (GEM) and was entirely volunteer-run. In the decade since, it has completely transformed, gaining 501-C3 status, adding staff, and becoming a community-wide effort.

Initially, the ministry moved to a different host location each week. For the past three years, a local United Church of Christ Church has housed the program for the whole winter. But the COVID-19 pandemic brought an end to congregate shelters, and that facility--with its single room of bunk beds--could no longer meet the need.

Leaders and community members had many conversations about how to move forward and meet the needs, but there were many challenges, including neighbors who did not want to have a program like this nearby.

“Many were saying ‘no’ based on fear,” says Rev. Alicia Speidel, Pastor of Hood River Valley Christian Church. “I was talking to our church board and we knew: this may have to come to us. I knew in my being, this needs to be at the church.”

And that is ultimately what happened. The congregation took a bold step and said yes to hosting where others had said no. But the challenge remained: how to safely house their vulnerable neighbors during a pandemic?

With funding through local city and county entities, the Hood River Warming Center purchased pallet shelters--an innovative, sustainable solution to temporary housing needs. And then they constructed the shelters on the church grounds.

“It’s like a little village,” says Pastor Speidel. The structures are made to endure the wind and the weather. Essentially, it is a ‘tiny house’ with a bed, a heater, smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, and electricity. Multiple units are connected by one conduit to the church.

Another challenge that added expense to the program this year was serving the meals safely. Normally, the local restaurants would donate trays of food, which volunteers would serve buffet style. But now, everything had to be packaged individually in separate containers.

With a COVID-19 Relief Ministry Grant from Week of Compassion, the church was able to purchase what they needed to safely serve food. With these and other mitigations, the ministry continued as it has for many years now.

While the members of Hood River Valley Christian Church have always supported this local program, they really stepped up this year. Volunteers with the church thrift shop even welcomed shelter guests to receive clothing items for free.

Pastor Speidel says “It’s had a huge impact on the staff, the volunteers, the guests, and the wider community, being able to serve in this way. The church stepped up and truly lived out its faith by choosing to have the shelter here. I am so proud of this faith community for doing this.”



*Photo: Shelter staff prepare to greet guests at the warming center.*

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