

Volunteer for the Homeless Tent Shelter Project

Sr Spectrum Jan 2019

by Donna Clontz, Chair, Reno Citizen Advisory Committee

Dotty is 68 and lived in a small apartment until October this year when her landlord raised her rent \$200 a month, so she was forced to move out. She had worked for years as a waitress in Reno and was living very frugally on her Social Security and small amount of savings. She tried living in a weekly motel, but found it far too expensive, so signed up for services and a bed at the Volunteers of America (VOA) emergency shelter. While she waits for a permanent bed in the women's shelter, she sometimes stays in the overflow shelter tent which is heated and has 50 steel-framed bunkbeds.

Every night, there are approximately 500 men, women and children in Reno staying at the Community Assistance Center, which is run by VOA at Record Street, or in the overflow facility. Individuals register in the men's shelter daily as VOA clients for a bed in one of their three adult facilities. When the shelters are full, which is almost always, they are then assigned to the overflow facility, which can accommodate up to 150 adults, and then the overflow tent which can accommodate another 79 adults. The tent is operated by the City of Reno. Tent clients are asked to check in at 9 p.m. for their assigned bunk and to check out in the morning by 5:30 a.m. On cold nights, when all the facilities' beds are at capacity, clients on the waiting list can sit in chairs in warming rooms at the Men's and Women's Shelter throughout the night.

The Homeless Tent Shelter Project is funded and managed by the City of Reno Community Development Department. **It is staffed every night by community volunteers**, usually in groups of three, each serving a 4 to 4-1/2-hour shift. Volunteers are coordinated by Dan and Teresa Jacobsen, with the LDS Church in Reno. Many area churches are fielding nightly teams of volunteers to stay the night at the tent to check in the homeless, give out water and blankets, keep watch over them while they sleep and check them out in the morning. Volunteers are vetted by the City of Reno and everyone receives a short orientation and training, both on video and in a written handout. The VOA Men's Shelter and security staff are available throughout the night to help with questions or any emergencies that may arise.

On the night that I volunteered, the weather was near freezing, and the tent was full of 42 men and 8 women. The majority of the patrons were over 50 years old, some in their 70s; one young woman told me she was 6 months pregnant. Several folks used a wheelchair or walker and one gentleman had a CPAP machine for his sleep apnea. The tent was warm, and people were sound asleep by 10:30 pm. Most were very polite and quietly provided their information and went to their bunks. Several were obviously suffering from mental or substance abuse issues, but overall, the experience was peaceful and quite humbling. I will participate again throughout the winter.

More volunteers are needed for nightly shifts through March 2019. Dan said, "No experience is needed, except having some compassion and willingness to help out folks in these tough circumstances." If you or your church, synagogue, mosque, business, or even a group of friends would like to serve a nightly shift, please contact Dan at danjacobsen61@gmail.com.

If you would like to learn more about all the services provided by Volunteers of America and learn how you can help, please contact Linda Grace at lgrace@voa-ncnn.org, 775-322-7143 or at their website <https://www.voa-ncnn.org/>. For more information, you can also contact me at donnaorm1@yahoo.com.