

No Freeze Center looking for new home

Cost of making town-ordered changes are too high

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WINDHAM — An organization that provides a place to sleep for the area's homeless is now looking for a new home of its own.

In recent weeks, the town cited the Windham Region No Freeze Hospitality Center, now located on Mountain Street, with several safety violations.

While the center's organizers have tried to rectify the problems, some of the town's requirements are just too costly, the center's Director David Fenn said Monday.

Plans are to keep the current center open, while looking for a new location, he said.

"We are now working with town officials to improve the space so it meets the standards where people are safe. People are essentially already safe. We have an overnight staff who is there to make sure everyone is safe. In addition, we have done most of the reasonable requests that were on the citation for code violations," Fenn said.

This includes installing additional fire alarms, and getting rid of "power strips," he said.

"The other things they want us to do, we cannot afford... installing a sprinkler system at a minimum would cost tens of thousands of dollars," Fenn said.

"Besides that, we're out of there in two months," he added. The center only operates five months of the year, from November until the first week in April. — Fenn hopes that the next home of the No Freeze Center will meet all the town's requirements, and that the center on Mountain Street will be allowed to remain open in the meantime.

"They [the town] had certain things they had to do, and we had things to do, and we're doing them. In the end, we're working on being friends," Fenn said.

A new location may be found soon, he added. "There are a couple places we're looking at. I'm actually looking at them this week with the fire marshal," he said.

"I think that in the long run, we are going to be OK. It's just frustrating for me to jump through these procedural hoops," he said.

What's especially painful about the situation is the amount of time and money the center's organizers put into converting the current location on Mountain Street, which had previously been an auto parts store and before that, an antiques shop.

"We have invested way more money in that place to make it appropriate [for a shelter] but we had to, in order to make it safe," he said.

"The bottom line, for me anyway, and for my staff, is that our location has got to be safe — from violence, from fire, from personal injury -- because if you're homeless, there really is no safety in your life," he said.

Fenn also noted that most people probably do not realize that the only other shelter in Windham is the Holy Family Shelter, which accepts only women and children. The nearest shelters that take in men are in Danielson, currently filled to capacity, and in New London.

The number of homeless who have sought shelter at the No Freeze Center has varied over the last few weeks.

"We had a stretch last week when we were in mid-20s. Our highest number has been 26 or 27, so far," Fenn said.

The fact that it has been unusually warm is not really part of the equation, he added. "Despite this weather, if you're homeless, you're homeless. Maybe it's 60

degrees, but if it's pouring rain, it's not a fun place to be," Fenn said.

The center is also seeing many people who are homeless for the first time in their lives. "The thing that's most remarkable to me – and this is very common – is that we're seeing people who were working, but had no health insurance. They had some kind of health issue they didn't go to a doctor for, because they didn't have insurance. And the situation progressed to the point of being hospitalized. Then they couldn't work, and they had hospital bills but no income. Their rent goes by the wayside and eventually, they are evicted, and they are homeless. There was one guy we had to wake up at 4:30 so he could get to work, where he's a loading dock manager for a 12-bay garage for Staples," Fenn said.



Cold, wet and unsafe. Many of the Windham area's homeless live in makeshift "camps" along the river all year-round. Organizers of the No Freeze Hospitality Center want to provide a clean, safe and warm alternative. Organizers had renovated a leased space on Mountain Street, but now have to move because of the town's requirement to install sprinklers and other expensive changes.

Photo courtesy of www.nofreeze.org