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Fox Valley Warming Shelter kicks off campaign to build new facility in Appleton

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APPLETON — James Haig gets on his knees every day to give thanks.

The Appleton man has been battered by the worst life could throw at him, including interconnected problems of job layoffs, alcoholism, eviction and homelessness.

"I walked the streets some nights because I had no place to go," he said. "When it was 5 below zero, I had to sleep in stairwells. It was so cold I couldn't really sleep."

Haig said he hopes telling his story can help others see the value in building a permanent shelter to help those who have fallen on hard times. It may keep others from sleeping in stairwells or under the Oneida Street Bridge or in empty semi trucks in industrial areas as they do now.

The Fox Valley Warming Shelter, which kicks off a fundraising campaign today at St. Vincent de Paul, would be the answer for up to 80 people looking for refuge from the cold, bitter night. The shelter currently operates by moving from church to church on a weekly basis.

"Anybody, through no fault of their own, can fall behind on rent. Anybody can become homeless at a moment's notice," Haig said. "In today's economy, a lot of good people are forced into bad situations. They remain good people."

Now 15 months clean and sober, Haig has been in low-income housing for a year, qualifies for food stamps and holds two part-time jobs, including one as a night safety manager at the shelter where he'd taken refuge two years ago.

The need is growing for a permanent building, said Brad Vivoda, shelter executive director.

"The Emergency Shelter (a similar facility) handles 70 people, and last year there were 850 shelter nights (calculated as one person for one night) they had to turn away," he said. "The prior year it was 400. They turn away an average of 15 people a day and those are just the ones who qualify. It can be as high as 30 people a day."

While the Fox Valley Warming Shelter does not maintain the same strict admittance policies as the Emergency Shelter of the Fox Valley, Vivoda said they have safeguards to protect staff and those seeking shelter. Those with a Breathalyzer reading of 0.23 blood-alcohol content or above are typically not admitted. The state's legal limit for driving is 0.08 blood-alcohol content.

A panic button allows staff to summon police quickly should problems arise. Just two people were asked to leave last year because of behavior issues.

Last winter, in its rotating schedule at churches, the Fox Valley Warming Shelter helped 140 individuals — 19 women and 121 men — for a total of 2,400 shelter nights. It averaged a dozen people a night with a high of 25.

Its supporters tried to move the shelter into a permanent home in the former Mr. Roy's Bridal on Wisconsin Avenue in Appleton last year, but gave up when residential neighbors objected. Railroad tracks and industrial buildings border this new, permanent location just north of St. Vincent de Paul. 1924 W. College Ave., Appleton.

"We want this to be year-round, to be a cooling center as well," said Rod Vander Hyden, the shelter's director of development. "We won't have to continually move around, moving our mattresses. It will have on-site showers, laundry facilities and extended hours of operation."

They're seeking \$950,000 in the capital campaign, and have \$50,000 so far including money from late founder Don Stoegbauer's memorial donations. Gries Architectural Group will design the building at cost and Miron Construction donated fees and management services. St. Vincent de Paul leased the site to the shelter for \$1 a year.

With foreclosures up 21 percent this year statewide over last year, the shelter's staff figures they'll be seeing more people. Job layoffs, divorce, medical bills, child support payments and underemployment also are issues that cause some to fall behind on rent and get evicted.

Sunday night was the first night the shelter operated this year, starting at St. Joseph's Catholic Church on Lawrence Street in Appleton. Vivoda expected 15 to 20 people would come seeking shelter and food.

It's the shelter's third winter in operation and is supported by 25 churches, church volunteers and funding from various organizations, including St. Vincent de Paul.

The shelter is meant to be a temporary home for those who can then qualify to move on to COTS or the Emergency Shelter or to an apartment.

"Seventy percent of our people move on," said Vivoda.
