



Fair questions and the truth about homelessness in Spokane



*Catholic
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DEAR FRIENDS AND PARTNERS,

Catholic Charities affirms the dignity of every person, partnering with parishes and the greater community to serve and advocate for those who are vulnerable, bringing stability and hope to people throughout Eastern Washington. Especially the most vulnerable in our midst — the homeless.

Rooted in this mission, our legacy of service to our most vulnerable neighbors, regardless of religious affiliation, continually builds a foundation of stability, health, and hope.

At the core of homelessness are complex issues, including skyrocketing Spokane rents, a staggering shortage of affordable housing, resistance to new shelters and housing developments in downtown or suburban neighborhoods, and, above all, the lack of a cohesive safety net for tens of thousands of people struggling with mental health and substance use disorders. Coupled with the many recent exits from the criminal justice system that have left so many with no other options beyond living on the street, these problems have caused homelessness in our City.

Catholic Charities–operated programs are designed to keep people from becoming homeless in the first place. We also offer a wide range of sizes and types of homeless shelters and homeless housing so that individuals and families that do experience homelessness have somewhere to turn to regardless of who they are or why or how they come to us.

Our homeless shelters offer a safe haven, as well as concentrated services, to help patrons stabilize their lives and achieve their goals. Barriers to accessing safe and affordable housing are key factors leading to the overrepresentation of BIPOC families and individuals experiencing homelessness in our region. We see systemic racism impacting housing, and eviction rates are disproportionately high where BIPOC families live. We build apartments for all individuals, families, and seniors with supportive services onsite so that each homeless shelter resident eventually has a place to live once we can get them stabilized. Once our homeless shelter clients move into permanent housing, we provide a massive array of services to make sure they maintain their housing long-term and do not slip back into homelessness.

Catholic Charities is pleased to share the following information that hopefully answers many of the most challenging questions we hear about homelessness in general and provides information about our homeless shelters and homeless housing services.



Rob McCann
President & CEO
Catholic Charities Eastern Washington

We believe that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. Every human being has value and deserves the basic human dignity of a meal, a bed, a shower and a toilet.

Rob McCann
President & CEO

How does Catholic Charities help chronically homeless individuals in Spokane?

We believe that every human being was made in the image and likeness of Christ and therefore deserves dignity and respect. We believe that every person deserves to sleep inside, eat a warm meal, and use the restroom indoors. The House of Charity is a low-barrier emergency shelter that is open to anyone in any condition, as long as they respect other patrons, staff, and themselves. The House of Charity provides breakfast, lunch, and dinner, a resource room, case management, and a respite program. Our team works tirelessly to build connections with patrons and empower them to move forward on their path towards stability and housing. Our staff engages clients in and around the House of Charity to help remove barriers to services and help them access life-saving support.

CATHOLIC CHARITIES FACTS TO KNOW:

- We believe every human being deserves the dignity and respect of eating, sleeping, and going to the bathroom indoors. That even includes those who may not be ready or able to work on their mental health or substance abuse challenges.

How does Catholic Charities help homeless families in Spokane?

The needs in our community continue to expand. The number of families experiencing homelessness is growing every year. We are continuing our long-term effort to provide or build housing for every adult and child in Eastern Washington who needs it. Catholic Charities operates 29 properties throughout Eastern Washington; 12 of those are for families.

Catholic Charities operates the Homeless Family Coordinated Assessment (HFCA), the regional coordinated entry system to provide services for families experiencing homelessness. Families are connected to a case manager who assists in removing barriers to accessing permanent housing resources.

Catholic Charities also manages St. Margaret's Shelter (SMS). SMS is a temporary shelter that offers wraparound services, providing families access to housing-focused case management, vocational services, life-skills training, tutoring for school-aged children, parenting resources, and an onsite food bank and clothing boutique. SMS works closely with other area providers

Does Catholic Charities have a housing program?

We are building housing, so every individual and family that needs it has a warm, dry and solid foundation for dignity and hope.

Our neighbors cannot work through the worst crises of their lives without a permanent place to live. Catholic Housing Communities builds affordable apartment buildings, so people have a safe and healthy home. We incorporate integrated case management services in our buildings, so help is always close by for people who are undergoing treatment for behavioral health disorders, who are receiving counseling for life's struggles, who need childcare so they can go to work, and who are getting case management to work toward their goals. We build housing so people can connect with a community that gives them identity.

When a family is in crisis, everything depends on housing. We build housing through the federal tax credit program, allowing wealthy corporations and individuals to invest in affordable housing, deferring their future tax liability. Tax credits will allow us to continue to meet Eastern Washington's need for housing without donations from local supporters.

Catholic Charities currently operates 29 affordable housing complexes with services for residents. We have 11 senior properties, 6 for individuals experiencing homelessness and 12 for families. We will open our newest 73-unit permanent supportive housing complex Gonzaga Family Haven in the fall of 2021. We will partner with Gonzaga University and Gonzaga Preparatory School to embed volunteers and services onsite for residents.

In 2022 we will break ground on Pasco Haven (50-unit permanent supportive housing complex for individuals experiencing homelessness) and Mother Teresa Haven (48-unit permanent supportive housing complex for families experiencing homelessness).



Can Spokane end homelessness?

It is unlikely that we can ever "end" homelessness. As you are reading this document, somebody is becoming newly homeless. Somebody is fleeing domestic violence or has lost their housing due to unemployment, addiction, or mental health challenges. Somebody has become homeless due to family trauma or other factors. Somebody has run out their welcome at their last couch surfing spot with friends and family and moved into their car. We likely can't end homelessness, but we know we can "solve" homelessness. Solving homelessness means that every human being should eat, sleep and go to the bathroom indoors and in a safe, warm, and clean environment where they can get services that help them to get back on the path to self-sufficiency. We believe through a wide range of shelter and housing options, we can solve homelessness in Spokane. We can make sure that every person in Spokane, at the very least, is eating, sleeping, and going to the bathroom indoors.

CATHOLIC CHARITIES FACTS TO KNOW:

- Residents in our recent downtown properties (Donna Hanson Haven, Jacklin Haven, and Schweitzer Haven) spent a cumulative average of 5.7 years experiencing homelessness before moving into our properties.

Are we attracting more homeless people to Spokane?

It is common to hear the question, "are we attracting more homeless people to Spokane?" The idea that the food is so good at the House of Charity or that the word is out so far and wide about the apartments we have built that people are coming from all over the United States has no basis in truth. Data collected by the City of Spokane tells us that these are our people.

From our Catholic Social Teaching perspective, we believe that all human beings are our people regardless of where they are from. However, we also know that the majority of individuals experiencing homelessness are from around our community. Schweitzer Haven, the most recent Catholic Charities apartment complex that was opened last year moved 50 homeless persons off the street and out of shelters and into their apartment. The average time those 50 men and women had been street homeless in Spokane before moving in was 5.6 years.

Stories about other cities like Portland or Seattle buying bus passes and plane tickets to send massive numbers of their homeless population to Spokane create a lot of controversy in our community. However, they are not accurate, taken out of context, and are used to create a sensational view intended to create fear and panic. A program called "ticket home" allows for a homeless person in another city to get bus tickets home but only after a one-on-one engagement with a case manager from the departure and arrival city, as well as verification that there is a family member in the arrival city that has agreed to house the person.

Where are all the homeless coming from?

50,000+ people are living at or below the federal poverty line in our immediate Spokane region. This is what intergenerational poverty looks like. Kids that grow up in unsafe and unstable homes and suffer from Adverse Childhood Experiences can often grow up to become adults who live in poverty if we don't intervene. This means 50,000+ people may be one lost job, one unexpected medical bill, one broken-down car, or one unplanned emergency away from being homeless. It means there are 50,000+ people who, due to any moment of crisis or trauma, could end up moving in and couch surfing with friends and family. It means 50,000+ people will eventually run out their welcome at all the places they might couch surf for many months or even years and at some point will find themselves moving into their car. When their car breaks down or is towed away for some reason, they will find themselves on the street or in a shelter if they are lucky. These 50,000+ people are many of the persons and families that continually backfill the homeless population. In addition, people getting out of jail with no place to go and senior citizens or families who can't afford rent increases are all part of this continual flow as well.

Opiate dependency and untreated mental health issues can quickly propel people into homelessness. Additionally, many young people (aged 15–22) live among those 50,000+ poor Spokane residents mentioned above whose home life is so unstable, unhealthy, undesirable, or unsafe that they prefer to hang around the streets of downtown rather than being at home. This is especially noticeable downtown during the warmer months when we see so many young people on bikes who appear to be homeless but, in many cases, are not.

Who is allowed to come into the House of Charity?

The House of Charity accepts anyone in any condition as long as they respect the staff, the facility, and the rules. Most patrons are willing and able to do this because they know we are their last and only option. Many of the people we see every day in the House of Charity are suffering from either a mental health illness, a substance use disorder, or both at the same time. This is a heartbreaking and tragic reality for our community. For many of the homeless at the House of Charity, there are no other shelter options in Spokane because they are still actively struggling with mental health and addiction issues.

At Catholic Charities, we believe that every person should eat, sleep and go to the bathroom indoors. That's why we take anyone in any condition at the House of Charity. It's also why we strongly discourage camping or sleeping outdoors of any kind: in our opinion, sleeping in tents is not a solution worthy of human dignity. Once tents and camping become allowed or accepted in our community, we believe that human dignity, safety, and health become diminished. The proliferation of tents in and around downtown creates public health concerns. It makes it easier for the small criminal element that attaches to and hides with the homeless population to conceal human and drug trafficking and other harmful activities. It also does not provide safeguards against infectious disease control, which we have seen to be critical during this pandemic.

Is Catholic Charities making things worse by enabling homeless people who refuse to get treatment for their addiction and mental health issues?

We believe that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. Every human being has value and deserves the basic human dignity of eating, sleeping, and going to the bathroom indoors. Every human being means every human being, including the ones who perhaps can't stop drinking or using drugs. The ones who can't stay on their meds for their mental health challenges still mean every human being. That's why we shelter everyone. Some may think this means we enable people to remain trapped in their addictions and mental health challenges. We believe that somebody struggling with addiction or mental health issues, even if they are not willing or able to accept help, still deserves basic human dignity and still deserves to eat, sleep, and go to the bathroom indoors in a safe environment. If we don't believe that, then what we are saying is people who can't beat their addictions and mental health challenges should simply stay outside and either survive or die on the streets, which harms them and the entire community further. Is a man experiencing homelessness any less deserving of safe shelter than a woman experiencing homelessness? We see this gender bias play out daily in the hearts and minds of our community members. Resentment towards fragile, ill people who receive basic human dignity (e.g., food, shelter, showers, a bed to sleep in) or attaching harsh moral judgment as to what is or is not "deserved" is one of the more troubling societal ills of our time. Is the risk that someone who "doesn't deserve it" might receive a meal or a bed or a shower greater than the risk that somebody silently in need might not get served?

In our Permanent Supportive Housing program for the homeless, we are required, by federal law, to use the Housing First model as a condition of being given the tax credit dollars necessary to construct our buildings. This means that some homeless persons who may still be struggling with addiction or mental health challenges can move into our apartments. After 50+ years of building and operating housing for vulnerable, poor people, we have learned that this model is absolutely an effective way to house the homeless. There are multiple other nonprofit organizations in Spokane providing this exact kind of housing for the homeless other than Catholic Charities, and all of us do so with considerable success.

Once in our housing, residents are offered a wide range of services onsite, including mental health and substance abuse counseling/assistance. Over 80% of residents are currently engaged in these and many other services. For the small number of residents who don't want these services at all, if their behavior strays outside of our house rules and regulations (which often happens if they are not even attempting to stabilize themselves), they are immediately required to accept these services as a condition of keeping their apartment once they are discovered to be breaking our rules.

What would happen if the House of Charity closed?

The belief that homeless persons would "simply disappear go away or move on" if there were no homeless shelters and no apartments at all for the homeless downtown has no basis in experience, fact, common sense, or scientific observation of other cities our size that has attempted that path.

1,240 different men and women (440 female and 796 males) slept at least one night at the House of Charity in 2019. The federally mandated City of Spokane Point-in-Time Count of all homeless persons in 2019 reported 541 unsheltered street homeless individuals. There were 48,139 total bed nights at the House of Charity in 2019. If House of Charity were not open, those 48,139 instances of one person sleeping in one of our beds for one night would have been 48,139 instances of people sleeping in parks, loading docks, alleys, encampments by the river, all over downtown, etc. **Numbers are from 2019 due to COVID restrictions which are not a true accurate picture of the challenge.*

CATHOLIC CHARITIES FACTS TO KNOW:

- Catholic Charities does not tolerate lawlessness. Any person committing a crime against people or property should be engaged by law enforcement and is immediately exited from our programs and services.
- At Catholic Charities we serve over to 74,000 different persons each year in 13 different programs designed to help seniors, children, the disabled, families, and individuals from all walks of life. Of those 74,000 approximately 650 are the clients who use the House of Charity and/or live in our homeless single adult housing.

What about the criminal activity that is sometimes perpetrated by people who seem to be homeless?

We believe strongly in the dignity and respect of every human person. That means we also believe strongly that all citizens and all business owners, and neighbors also deserve dignity and respect. There has to be an ability to have retail and shopping and tourism and restaurants downtown without fear of crime or dangerous persons. We believe that part of unconditional love also includes an emphasis on accountability. Being mentally ill or being addicted should not be a crime. However, if persons experiencing homelessness commit crimes against people or property, they must be held accountable by law enforcement and criminal justice systems.

Unfortunately, a small group of career criminals attaches to the homeless population to prey on homeless people who are easy marks because they are often very ill and very fragile. We regularly report criminal persons who may be homeless (or just hiding in the homeless population). We have zero tolerance for crimes against persons or property. Most of the crime attributed to homeless people downtown is not being committed by people who want to come into the House of Charity or live in our apartments. They are people who have become bad actors and have engaged themselves in menacing or criminal behavior. We believe that they should be engaged by law enforcement, especially because their victims are often our own law-abiding, fragile homeless clients.

Can people be banned from the House of Charity? If so, what happens next?

Catholic Charities is a low-barrier shelter that welcomes all in need. We mandate that clients respect themselves, others, and our staff and our rules. Unfortunately, at times some of our most fragile clients have a hard time adhering to our rules and in cases where there is criminal or potentially violent activity, we temporarily ban individuals from using HOC services if they consistently do not follow House of Charity rules. When they are banned, we work with them to address the issues to continue to provide essential homeless services and if they are willing to engage with us we eventually lift their ban. In some cases where there has been extreme criminal or violent behavior a ban could be weeks or even months before we allow them to talk to us about coming back in.

There have been some rare situations where clients are permanently banned from the House of Charity which we always hope to avoid, but sometimes are necessary to protect our staff and other patrons. This is not an outcome we ever want, but we need to ensure our clients and staff are safe. If a client is banned due to criminal activity, we always work with the Spokane Police department, community court and other homeless shelter providers to engage the individual. However, when a person is banned from the House of Charity, that also means there is another person with possibly nowhere to go, who might end up spending more time in the downtown area. It is a difficult situation for us and for the homeless persons who are banned. Our neighbors and the downtown community often have a wrong impression that we have no rules or consequences for our patrons but at times, when we have to enforce the rules and consequences that we do have, it means another homeless person could end up spending time or sleeping somewhere else in the downtown area that is problematic for our neighbors and downtown community partners.

What is the cost of all of this?

The average chronic street homeless super-utilizer can spend anywhere from \$50,000 to \$250,000 per year per person on costs, including police, fire, ambulance, ER, hospital, jail, and social services. Alternatively, for less than \$7,164 per year per person, they can live in one of the Catholic Charities' permanent supportive housing first apartment buildings. The math is indisputable here: the more homeless people we can put into housing, the fewer homeless people we will see sleeping on the streets of downtown Spokane.

We had a well-known House of Charity patron who went to the ER 61 times in one year. The following year, we moved him into Fr. Bach Haven, and he went to the ER only twice. This represents savings for taxpayers, emergency responders, and many others. Most importantly, it represents the ability to save the human dignity of that House of Charity patron.

CATHOLIC CHARITIES FACTS TO KNOW:

- It costs \$153,574 per month to provide essential resources to patrons at the House of Charity. These services sleep 135 people each night and provide three meals a day. This funding also sustains access to showers, laundry and mail, and provides clients with case management and outreach services. The average cost per person per week is \$262.

Are Catholic Charities housing programs for the homeless successful?

Success" in housing the homeless is often measured by whether or not a street homeless person, once moved from the shelter or the street to a Catholic Charities apartment, is still in their stable housing two years later. Our success rate is 93%, which is the national goal for this metric. The idea that we are simply giving chronically street homeless persons their own apartments and leaving them unsupervised and unsupported to do whatever they want to do is a commonly weaponized fear that some in the community try to promote. It's simply untrue. We have a wide range of services, staff, and security at all of our housing properties. 80% of all residents are actively engaged with services and 100% of residents are regularly contacted by our staff. We hold all of our residents to a very comprehensive set of policies, procedures, rules, and regulations. Like any apartment in Spokane, sometimes a minimal number of residents make bad choices, and when they do, we take swift action just like any landlord would do.

No barriers are put between people in need and Catholic Charities housing. We don't require potential residents to be sober or have perfect credit scores to live at our properties. Residents must be accountable to themselves and the surrounding community by supporting a safe, peaceful environment for all to enjoy. Here are some of the policies and practices we use in our housing for the homeless to accomplish this goal:

- Residents sign a good neighbor policy, recognizing that they are part of the community and responsible for ensuring our neighbors' use and enjoyment of their property.
- Residents' actions represent Catholic Charities in our community. Although it is rare if a resident is arrested for a crime against people or property within two miles of our buildings and receives a record of SPD arrest, the resident is subject to eviction.
- When a guest visits one of our residents, they must sign in and be escorted in common areas by the resident host at all times. Additionally, overnight guest visits are limited.
- Residents are engaged regularly by our staff to make sure they have the opportunity to connect with services that can improve their wellness and their quality of life. We inspect units quarterly for maintenance purposes and more often if a resident struggles to maintain their housing.
- If a resident struggles and violates rules and expectations, we enter into a "risk to tenancy" agreement. This agreement provides an opportunity to preserve their housing with conditions that the resident engages with services and support.



Why does Catholic Charities build housing so close to the House of Charity?

We have built five 50-unit apartment communities within the block around the House of Charity. That represents 250 permanent supportive housing units (meaning there is staff onsite to help the many vulnerable people who live in the building). We have built them there intentionally and with the City's approval because it allows very fragile people moving into their new apartment to be close to services like mental health, food, medical services, and stabilizing case management services. These 250 units have created concern that there is too much of a density or concentration of "those people" in one area around the House of Charity. We are deeply concerned with this kind of thinking. People deserve to be able to live close to the services they need and desire. A report published by the Downtown Spokane Partnership shows that in 2018, there were 9,100 residential units downtown with 74% of which were market rate. We have built 250 units for the homeless. That's not an alarming number. It's 2.7%. We can't arrest our way out of homelessness. We can't find our way out of this by hoping all the homeless will leave town or magically disappear. We can't wish or hope our way out of this – we have to house our way out of it. That's why we build housing at Catholic Charities.

CATHOLIC CHARITIES FACTS TO KNOW:

- There are a total of 9,100 units of residential housing in downtown Spokane. Catholic Charities has built 250 total units for the homeless.

How does Catholic Charities pay for the housing we are building?

All of our apartment complexes for the homeless are funded without a single private donation being asked for or needed. The federal government pays for our buildings through the tax credit program., Catholic Charities is awarded tax credits, authorized by the tax code, through a competitive process. We sell these tax credits to private investors and use the proceeds to develop housing We use a wide range of Catholic Charities funds to provide staffing, services, upkeep, and security to our buildings.



How do we move forward, find solutions and talk about this very hard issue?

In the end, how we see homelessness comes down to what we each believe in our work lives, our faith lives, our home lives, our lives as citizens, and our lives as taxpayers and community members. Our beliefs come from our own experiences and upbringings, and we have to respect and value each other's ideas and core beliefs even if we don't always agree with them. Indeed, there are many sides and views of these complex issues, and we don't pretend to have all the answers. Perhaps there are no right or wrong answers at all, just opportunities for dialogue and openness to new ways to approach seemingly impossible problems.

Homelessness will continue to be a controversial lightning rod for all kinds of debate and, yes, even argument. And that has to be ok. It has to be ok that we can disagree but still have a respectful open-minded dialogue. We are always open to the Holy Spirit and collaborative discussions leading us to change. We can't know what changes are the right ones to make without knowing, loving, and listening to the heart and soul of those who see things differently than we do.

We know we must be willing to hear alternate viewpoints. We must all be open to talking with each other and listening to each other. We must all be patient and be ready to hear good-intentioned questions even when we don't have perfect or comfortable answers. We should all be willing to find new ways for mutual understandings to be created. But we ask our community also to please beware. Beware of those who only want to make you afraid of the homeless or those who want to make you angry at the homeless or blame the homeless or blame those who try to serve them. Beware of that trap. It's a trap of negativity and divisiveness. It's always easier to dehumanize another person when you are angry at them or afraid of them. Spokane is a fantastic place filled with joy and generosity, and we should never dehumanize anyone. We must welcome all of the hard questions and reasonable, intelligent thoughts of good-hearted people, and we must be open to hearing how we might find ways to serve the homeless differently. We are available to all possibilities and solutions that involve us working together. Together we can find common ground, and common ground always carries the day.



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