

Council wants resource center for homeless

By Bernie Delinski Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, May 25, 2016 12:15 am

FLORENCE -- The leader of a local organization dedicated to the fight against homelessness issued a challenge to the community Tuesday.

Krista Manchester, executive director of the Homeless Care Council of Northwest Alabama, wants to raise \$200,000 for a Homeless and Poverty Resource Center.

The goal is to raise \$50,000 for Phase 1 of the project, which would secure and develop a location.

The second and third phases involve an additional \$150,000 in fundraising within 24 months, Manchester said.

The funds also could be used to get matching grants for the project.

"We already have a community of carers," Manchester told the crowd at an event called Bridge Breakfast, which is designed to bring together those in northwest Alabama who are involved in assisting those in need.

"When people say we don't have the resources, that's not true," she said. "We just don't have the right access to all those resources."

Manchester said the proposed resource center would solve that issue. She said the wide range of people attending Tuesday's breakfast is an indication of the area's desire to help.

"I see a community," Manchester said. "I see churches. I see agencies, people who care. But we've got to have a centralized place to help them (homeless)."

The center would be open from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekdays, Manchester said. It would include council offices, and serve as a "coordinated entry location" where a homeless person can receive assistance.

Food, medical and mental health evaluations, and a mailing address are among features the center would provide, she said.

A January survey from the council revealed there are 337 homeless people in northwest Alabama, which is a 35-percent increase from last year's count, Manchester said.

She said part of the reason for the increase is improvements made in conducting the survey, thanks in part to enhanced relationships and communications with homeless people.

She pointed to the Room in the Inn Shoals project as an example of the area's willingness to help. The program, which started in January 2015, has grown to include 29 churches that provide shelter to homeless residents during winter months.

"What that tells me is that there's a hunger in the community to really make a difference together," Manchester said.

Shuttle program

The council also is testing another project. It has created a shuttle program that offers free vouchers for participants.

Program officials said they are doing so to find out whether the response is enough to continue carrying it on after initial funding runs out.

"When we talk about the biggest hurdles for clients, they involve transportation," Manchester said.

The system started in late April. Officials will use ridership statistics to gauge the need for such a shuttle.

The Dedicated Transportation Route is underway in Florence, and officials plan to expand it into Colbert County in June.

Manchester said the program uses vans provided by the Northwest Alabama Council of Local Governments, but the council is helping pay for drivers and gas.

Two grants -- a Community Development Block Grant and a grant distributed by the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs -- combined with local matching funds are helping fund the program. That amounts to \$10,000.

Manchester said the rides are designated for extremely low-income, no-income or homeless people. Potential riders must go through a council-approved agency to determine eligibility. These include the Community Action Agency, Salvation Army, Homeless Care Council or through dialing the 2-1-1 assistance line.

"We will do this as long as we think it's working," Manchester said. "We're not ready for this to be mass public. If I can find a grant that pays for taxi service, we'll do that, as well. We're also hoping school systems become familiar with this, so we can give families that information."

Those eligible receive one-month vouchers that allow them to ride for free. The vouchers can be renewed monthly, Manchester said.



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Krista Manchester wrote the grant that helped fund the Homeless Care Council bus in Lauderdale County. The bus is currently in service 5 days a week and begins its route at the Salvation Army.