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#### MAY 21, 2020

# Four organizations teamed up and 'probably saved some lives'

# By Tristan Lorei, contributor

Posted in COVID-19 info, Harrisonburg Issues



After being screened by the Suitcase Clinic nurses, Tammy Kiser, the clinical coordinator for the organization, takes down the clients' names. All clients must be screened before entering the shelter.

# Photos and article by Tristan Lorei, contributor

Alena Pardi and her husband, Tim, thought they had found a house in Virginia and could move from Tennessee. But when they arrived in the Valley, they found they had been

scammed, and the "seller" had run off with their first rent payment — which amounted to much of the money they had.

Stranded, they slept in their car in Walmart's parking lot. Then the coronavirus hit.

A Catholic priest put the couple up for two nights in a local motel before referring them at the beginning of April to the Open Doors temporary shelter located at JMU's Godwin Hall. After just one night at the shelter, they were evaluated and transferred to a motel that another organization, Mercy House, used to shelter clients with the greatest risk for the virus, such as being older or having a pre-existing chronic health condition.

"I was just grateful to have a place to lay our head at night so, you know, we didn't have to sleep in the car," Pardi said. "Everybody at the Open Doors, especially the nurses [with the Suitcase Clinic] ... you can tell they care."



Alena and Tim Pardi sit outside their motel room. The room number has been obscured to maintain the privacy of the residents.

Four Harrisonburg organizations – Mercy House, Open Doors, Our Community Place and the Suitcase Clinic – have worked separately and together for years with people experiencing homelessness in Harrisonburg. In early March, they pooled their resources to bolster aid for this community during the era of COVID-19, which has required an additional level of coordination to keep vulnerable clients safe and healthy.

Shannon Porter, the Executive Director of Mercy House, credits all four organizations and their staff and volunteers with stitching together a safety net for this community that didn't exist.

"We've kept a lot of people safe," Porter said. "I don't think it's hyperbole to say that we've probably saved some lives."

## Coming together to help

The organizations' leaders said the efforts have been particularly urgent because their clients have no homes in which to shelter in place and higher-risk clients are particularly vulnerable to the coronavirus.

Sam Nickels, the executive director of Our Community Place, said the organizations had weekly meetings in March with other agencies to better anticipate the following months.

"We were trying to prepare for a coming crisis, and part of that was the funding," Nickels said.

Open Doors and Our Community Place benefited from federal funding through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act that Congress passed, as well as local funding from the Community Foundation and donors. Mercy House also received some grants and used its own agency's funding to begin the process. The Suitcase Clinic — made up of nurses, nurse practitioners, physician assistants and nursing student volunteers — has mostly relied on local funds and donations, such as through the Community Development Block Grant.

This new program's goal is to sustain their clients during the pandemic while also ensuring they are continuing to pursue permanent housing. The organizations work directly with their clients to find sustainable living while they are in either the shelter or motel.



The cots at the Open Doors shelter are kept at least six feet apart to ensure social distancing as best as possible.

Both Mercy House and Our Community Place work directly with their clients to help them get paperwork for housing vouchers and complete the necessary steps to find permanent housing while in a shelter or motel.

Graham Witt, president of Open Doors, said these efforts help ensure homelessness is addressed properly.

"It's important that we always look for a way out. It's a hand-up, not a hand-out," Witt said.

# Setting up the emergency shelter

The shelter at Open Doors is open from 7 p.m. – 7 a.m. every night. This is an extension of its thermal shelter that operates during the colder months each year from November to April. The group took that approach and restructured it to fit its new purpose. Once JMU closed for the spring, the university agreed to make available Godwin Hall for the shelter instead of Open Doors using its normal rotation through local churches. That allowed Suitcase Clinic nurses to screen people, such as checking temperatures or for other symptoms, before they enter the shelter.

The Open Doors shelter can house anywhere from 35-40 people a night.

For some clients, like Katherin Dunn who has been coming to the Open Doors shelter on and off for two years — the new location at Godwin Hall has been better.

"You don't have to worry if you're going to have to get a bed one night and not



Emelie Boucher, JMU School of Nursing student and volunteer for the Suitcase Clinic, keeps a log of the clients' names as they enter the shelter.

have it another night because it's a first come first serve basis," she said. "So, I know every night I come here, I'm going to have a bed to sleep in."

In addition, Open Doors provides dinner for the clients at the shelter and the motel seven days a week. In the six weeks that the shelter has been running, donations from local faith communities and individuals as well as assistance from JMU's dining halls have covered the costs of all meals.



Adonica Miller packages meals to be taken to the motel. Dinner is delivered from the shelter to the residents at the motel every night. Miller has volunteered with Open Doors for eight years. Since the start of the new shelter, she has volunteered every night.

Our Community Place supplies breakfast seven days a week at its community center downtown, lunch every weekday to the motel and a brunch on the weekends. It also provides any non-medical help to the clients at the motel such as laundry, car or phone help as well as anything else that would require them to leave the motel. The Suitcase Clinic monitors the client's medications, schedules and transports them to doctor's appointments, and helps them sign up for Medicaid.



Tim Cummings, a temporary taste manager for Our Community Place, loads bags of food into his van to take to the motel.

While Suitcase Clinic nurses and volunteers don't administer tests, they give each client at the motel their own thermometer, and anyone exhibiting symptoms is sent to RMH for testing.

"We have actually only had one person from the motel that's needed to be tested and they were negative," said Tammy Kiser, the clinical coordinator and an assistant professor at JMU's School of Nursing. "So, it's working to have them there."



Noah Harrilla, a JMU School of Nursing alumni and volunteer for the Suitcase Clinic, screens a client before he enters the shelter.

At the shelter, similar screening resulted in three people getting referred for testing so far. After clients pass the screening, they must wash their hands before they can check in.

# Motel stays keeping vulnerable clients safe

While everyone is welcome at the shelter, the designated motels located around Harrisonburg are strictly for high-risk clients — those who have a severe risk of dying if they were to catch COVID-19 due to pre-existing conditions. Those motels aren't being named in order to protect the privacy of clients staying there.

The Suitcase Clinic nurses decide who is transferred to the motel, while Mercy House handles the procurement and logistical side of getting them checked in to the motel. The motel has been taking about four to five clients in a week with a total of 25-30 in the last six weeks. The motel has 20 households — some individuals and some families — sheltered.

James Weathers, a client at the motel, has a heart condition, high blood pressure and diabetes. After a series of deaths in his family since he moved to the area in 2001,

Weathers became homeless in November. Open Doors found him and brought him to the shelter.



James Weathers sits on the ground outside his room at the motel for high-risk clients.

"I fell off," Weathers said. "I didn't even have a will to live. I was at the end of my road. I wanted to die, but I didn't have enough heart to kill myself. So, I just suffered and went through it."

Weathers says these organizations have been a pillar for him.

"[Open Doors] gave me a place where I could stay, I could eat and I could be comfortable," Weathers said. "I didn't have to worry about being on the street."

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