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Shelter for victims

There's only one in Jefferson County and it's in need of repair

By Allison Arthur of the Leader Apr 20, 2016



Beulah Kingsolver, executive director of Dove House Advocacy Services, pulls double duty making beds at the shelter for victims of domestic violence. A former bed-and-breakfast, the shelter can house as many as 18 people. It is the only facility in Jefferson County for women and children in need of emergency housing. Photo by Allison Arthur

Imagine what it would be like to live in a home with as many as 17 people, mostly women and children, all who have escaped from some trauma.

Beulah Kingsolver, executive director of Dove House Advocacy Services, doesn't have to imagine. She knows what it's like because she manages that house and sees firsthand the impact of so many people living in one house.

The building is a former bed-and-breakfast inn that was converted 10 years ago into Jefferson County's only shelter for victims of domestic violence.

Living in it can be hard on the people, hard on the house, she says.

Today, a Thursday in March, she's wearing rolled-up jeans and is ready to get down to business. Making beds, doing laundry, even plunging toilets is as much a part of her job as is writing grants and listening to victims. She's made one bed and has three more to go. There are mounds of laundry to do after a woman and three children moved out of the shelter.

That woman and her three children were on Kingsolver's mind for months because, technically, she should have pushed the woman to move on after 90 days. That's supposed to be the limit for people living in a shelter. It's a temporary, not a permanent, housing solution.

"But we all do extensions. What else are we going to do?" she says of letting the woman stay months, not days, longer.

And therein lies the problem that Kingsolver wishes local leaders would start to tackle in earnest: the lack of affordable housing options in Port Townsend and Jefferson County.

The woman and three children moved on – to Clallam County and a friend's home where she could live with her children, including one who has autism.

FUND A CAUSE

Keeping the shelter in good condition is important not just for the sake of being a good steward of the house, but for the sake of helping the victims heal, says Kingsolver.

"There's a new understanding called informed trauma care. The science finally has proven what psychologists have been saying forever ... that our body heals if we give it a safe place," she says of wanting the shelter to be not just safe, but warm and inviting.

“We know instinctively if you go to a yucky hotel or a nice one. You need to feel safe if you are coming from a trauma place. You need a place that is well maintained to feel safe,” she says.

The numbers prove how well-used the shelter’s rooms are.

Dove House provided 3,681 bed nights in 2015 – 1,940 to adults, again mostly women, and 1,741 to children.

The numbers are why the Port Townsend Rotary Club has taken up the Dove House's shelter as a Fund-A-Cause at its annual dinner and auction this Saturday, April 23.

The emergency shelter has five bedrooms, each with a private bath. There's a common kitchen, living room, study and children's play area. Two refrigerators hold enough food for the families; the washer and dryer are replaced more often than those in a typical household.

“I can house up to 18 bodies. The census is 11 at the moment. That doesn't include the apartment, which is being used as a transitional apartment,” Kingsolver says.

All of the rooms need touchup painting and repairs where it is obvious a baseboard heating system was taken out and an overhead system installed. The kitchen could use some remodeling so that women could see their young children in the dining room while they are attending to cooking.

Although Kingsolver is glad the shelter can do so much for so many – and she's hoping the Rotary auction will bring in as much as \$60,000 to make needed repairs and perhaps buy new equipment – it's the number 191 in her statistics that bothers her.

That's the number of “households” – not individual women or men or children – that she's had to turn away in the past year because there were no room at the shelter for them.

HOUSING OPTIONS

Take that day not long ago, a Friday, Kingsolver recalls, when Jefferson Healthcare, a few yards from Dove House in Port Townsend, sent a woman over for help. The woman had been camping out in one of the hospital lobbies.

“Her only request was this: ‘Do you have a place where I can get a few hours of sleep?’ She slept in my conference room. She wasn’t a victim. She couldn’t go to the [winter] shelter because she had a service animal,” says Kingsolver.

Kingsolver called Olympic Community Action Programs (OlyCAP), and its housing services director, Kathy Morgan, found the woman a place to be safe until her next disability check came in.

“That should not be the best we can do,” says Kingsolver of having so few housing options for so many people in need.

Kingsolver and Morgan work together, even though they don’t always see eye to eye on whose needs should come first.

Morgan manages the Haines Street Cottages, which now houses more than two dozen men and women going through either therapeutic drug court or therapeutic mental health court. They do not pay rent. It’s considered an emergency shelter and it, too, is supposed to be temporary. A few stay for years because they have nowhere else to go.

In the past, those houses had been used for women and children. While there are women, a baby and a teenager there now, all adults at the seven houses are going through some court-mandated program.

“I believe it’s important to have a place for people in drug court to live. I believe it’s important for people with mental issues to have a safe place to live,” says Kingsolver. “Right now, if you are in drug court and mental health court, you have a judge advocating for you. You have OlyCAP advocating for you. You have an attorney advocating for you, all paid for, to get you in a safe home.

“If you are a single mom or dad and your only barrier is that you are a victim, the only place to advocate for you is us, and I have no housing options except for a shelter and two-year transitional apartment. I think it needs to have a priority, and we do at least need to be at the same table.

“When we put them in the cottages, we give them a safe place, but we’ve widened the gap for others, and there’s no place for victims.

“Every day, the cops come and say to the victim, ‘You need somewhere to go.’ That’s what they say. But where do they go?”

HIGH COSTS

From where Kingsolver sits, there needs to be more housing options in Jefferson County – and sooner rather than later.

“The only thing that’s been built since I’ve moved here are Habitat [for Humanity] houses and some self-sufficiency housing and the transitional housing at Dove House. Those are two pieces of the puzzle. But we’ve lost some housing, too.

“We have to invest so that in five years, we’re better off than we are now. We’ve been talking about it for 10 years,” she says.

Rentals are hard to come by – especially for someone like the woman and her three children who are escaping a difficult home life, but finding a rental is also a big problem for those just starting out, Kingsolver says.

“When I moved out of a rental and bought in 2014, I was renting a three-bedroom, and the gal put up a sign and she had 12 applicants in no time. It was \$1,200 for a tiny three-bedroom house,” Kingsolver says.

If she had not had a home in Montana with a lot of equity, Kingsolver says, she could not have been able to afford to buy anything in Jefferson County.

And she's not alone.

Tina Burlingame, Dove House development director, who is listening in on the conversation, reflects that she watched the rental market for months, thinking she'd get her own place in Jefferson County when she moved here from Wisconsin. But she couldn't find a rental that matched her wages at the nonprofit.



If she needed to now, she says, she would not be able to find a rental today that she could afford on her income alone. Like the woman who left for Clallam County, Burlingame says, she would also have to move from the area.

“This is an example on why some people stay in abusive relationships. They don't want to have to move away from their community, their friends, their family and even their jobs. And why should they?” Burlingame says.

“I don't understand how families make it here. I really don't,” Burlingame says pensively.

OPTIONS, TINY HOUSES

Ultimately, the lack of affordable housing is going to have an impact on the community and its ability to care for people, not just women and children who are victims of domestic violence, Kingsolver says.

“We can't bring in caregivers if we have no place for them to live. Otherwise, we'll have a bunch of old people here and no one to take care of them,” she says.

“It's going to impact us in so many ways if we don't provide housing. It impacts our victims for sure, single women and children,” she says.

But it also impacts the community overall, limiting the kind of people who can call Jefferson County home.

Kingsolver is the mother of a 33-year-old and a 27-year-old. Her oldest son is married and wants a second child. But the house he and his family is living in is small, she said. Both he and his spouse work, and they are looking for self-sufficiency or Habitat housing, because even with both of them being wage-earners, they can't afford to buy a home in a community where the median home price was \$275,750 in February, according to the Northwest Multiple Listing Services.

"I think the county and the city should be leaders in this. They should step up and say, 'Here's what we can do,'" says Kingsolver.

Tiny houses, which are on the radar for at least one organization, may not be the answer for everyone, but it might work for some people, and it could even work for a single woman and a child needing a safe place to be, she says.

Thinking out loud, Kingsolver wonders if some money set aside for homeless could be used to buy a house every year.

"Where are we going to put the people who are working? It has to be the whole community looking.

"We're pretty amazing people here. We have tons of educated people. We have tons of resources. Why can't we build one house a year?" Kingsolver asks.

SHELTER HOUSES LOCALS

What people keep asking, and she keeps sharing, is who are the people who use the Dove House shelter.

"At least 90 percent of our people are from Jefferson County," Kingsolver says.

Roughly half of the people in her shelter also work.

"It's people who are serving us as bartenders and cashiers downtown. I'm always careful when I shop. But there are nurses, bankers, professionals as well.

"I know their life story, their secrets. They don't want their bosses to know they are living in a shelter. People have biases. If you are competing for a job, do you really want to tell them you are living in a shelter?"

People ought to have a safe place to call home, says Kingsolver, a place they don't have to share with strangers, where they can feel safe.

“You need to feel safe if you are coming from a trauma place. You need a place that is well maintained to feel safe.”

Beulah Kingsolver

executive director

Dove House Advocacy Services

Rotary Club event Saturday, April 23

Editor's note: A headline on the front page is incorrect in the Leader's print edition. This is a Rotary Club event.

The Rotary Club of Port Townsend hosts its annual dinner and auction at 5:30 p.m., Saturday, April 23 at Fort Worden Commons.

Dove House Advocacy Services is the beneficiary of the 2016 Fund-A-Cause section of the auction. The program's shelter for victims of domestic violence needs new windows, fresh paint and furnishings.

Tickets are \$100 each and include dinner and dessert. For more information on the auction, see ptrcdinnerauction.com.

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