

Isaiah 61 Cafe touts success with new low-barrier shelter

By JON DECKER, THE LACONIA DAILY SUN
Feb 25, 2022



A view from inside the new shelter at the cafe (Jon Decker/Laconia Daily Sun photo).

MORE INFORMATION

Isaiah 61 Cafe's new low-barrier shelter



LACONIA — In early January, the planning board voted in favor of letting the Isaiah 61 Café host a low-barrier, overnight, winter-only shelter. This makes the Café the first “wet” shelter in the city, meaning those that use the Café’s services are not required to be sober. The other two shelters in the area require sobriety to sleep there, leaving a significant population of the homeless community without options to stay the night.

“That is a need, because right now prior to us there was no place for people to go,” said Dawn Longval, president and founder of Isaiah 61. “You have to be completely sober to go to the Belknap House or the Carey House. You have to carry that sobriety as long as you’re there, and that’s impossible for those struggling in it.”

The Café opened on New Salem Street in 2018, open during the day to anyone who needed a meal, basic hygiene services such as showers or laundry, or just somewhere to relax and feel welcome. Now, the organization can extend that welcome during winter nights.

But not all members of the community agree with this concept. Two members of the planning board voted against the shelter. One of them, Mike DellaVecchia spoke with the Daily Sun about his reasoning and concerns.

“Many people are opposed to it but afraid to admit it,” DellaVecchia said. “You’re basically telling those people you can take all your money and spend it on alcohol and drugs because we’re gonna

house you and we're gonna feed you. So all your money, you can buy your party goods. It's a disservice to those people. They're not encouraging them to become sober."

"We serve two meals a day, five days a week, we have showers, we have bathrooms, we have lockers for the homeless to store their things in," Longval explained. "We also try to assist with people getting rehab for drug addictions. We try to coordinate with different services around the city to get people to the next level."

The main room of the Café is a large open area, populated by couches, tables, and even a stage with instruments. Here, guests and volunteers play guitar and sing freely.

Near the back is a long table where volunteers place food for breakfast and lunch. Behind a large sliding barn style door decorated with a woodburning of Jesus Christ's face, is a set of showers, bathrooms and locker.

Behind this area is the shelter, a small brick room with around 30 bunk beds.

Those that stay overnight are monitored by a pair of volunteers, who can view the interior of the bunkroom through a security camera placed inside the shelter.

"We were so excited because there were a lot of unknowns," Longval said. "I'm so thankful we do have a handful of regular volunteers that want to help with shelter. We have teams, most do one night a week, there's a couple that do two nights a week."

The shelter requires that at least two individuals are monitoring the sleepers each night.

In addition to DellaVecchia's concerns that the Café is not encouraging people to get better, he focused on the potentially negative economic impact and "bad look" homeless people bring to the city.

"It's a detriment to the downtown because at 8:30 in the morning you have 30 homeless people out there packing their carts and stuff waiting around for them to open up and again waiting to check back in at night. It's not a great image for the downtown area," DellaVecchia said. "They need a place to go, I don't think Laconia is it. And by having that here, you're attracting more of it and you're encouraging it."

When asked if DellaVecchia had seen an increase in homelessness in recent years, he said no. As for alternative destinations for the homeless, DellaVecchia stated he wasn't in favor of letting people freeze to death, but stressed that Laconia was not the place to be. "Now, I hate to say go to Concord or Manchester, but I don't know what's available," DellaVecchia said. "Before Isaiah, what did they do?"

“Well, we would try to find a place to go, and if we do, cops would tell us to move along,” said Cindy Field, one of the Café’s clients. “It’s hard for people to be out there not knowing where to go. If you leave your blankets hidden, the city will take it and throw it away. Here you can at least leave stuff here without it getting lost or thrown away.”

For Cindy and others, the shelter, along with the day hangout, has been a game changer.

“It’s a good place to go at night and sleep,” said Field, “you don’t have to be out in the elements and you don’t have to worry about the cops telling you to move. It means a lot to us that they did this.”

“It’s a great atmosphere,” said Adam Kasian, another person that utilizes Isaiah’s services. “It’s like a family away from your own. There’s a lot of people struggling there. Last night I missed my bed and I was in the cold all night long. Just a good reminder of the blessings we have. I’ve been able to sit down, charge my phone, get to appointments, things that you normally can’t do without a place to stay warm.”

It is this familial atmosphere, Longval says, that makes the Café unique.

“We’ve already developed relationships with them and that’s what makes it different.

“We’re about loving them where they’re at and trying to give them hope and encouragement to move through life,” Longval said. “I think they’re better off inside than hanging around outside. Because when they’re outside they’re continuing to do drugs and cause chaos amongst the businesses and homes around here. We’re bringing them inside with supervision. Once they’re inside they cannot do further drinking or drugs.”

DellaVecchia thinks that a more bootstraps approach is the better way to go.

“I’ve done the math, and four people making minimum wage could afford an apartment in Laconia. You’d have to get a two bedroom apartment and bunk up, but they can afford to do it. There’s certainly enough work out there. Every business here is begging for help.”

When asked if there was enough housing for this method, DellaVecchia acknowledged the city’s one percent vacancy rate, stating it was tight, but there are still places available.

“There’s always going to be a certain percentage of people that just want to be drug addicts, alcoholics, and suck off the system as best they can.” DellaVecchia said. “I don’t know where they get their money for drugs. If they’re prostituting, stealing, whatever they do, some probably get social security benefits or welfare, and they spend their money on drugs and alcohol instead of food.”

“They’ve never took that walk,” Kasian said regarding negative perceptions towards homeless people. “No matter where you are, people are gonna have a stigma about homelessness. I know for a fact that if this shelter wasn’t here, there would be many homeless people out on the streets. I would say it’s time to look in the mirror and take a journey within yourself and unhardened your heart.”

Longval has long grappled with misconceptions and stigma towards homelessness, and suggested that more people should think before they judge.

“It’s sad because they’re making judgment calls on people who have no idea about their story or life. They’re one paycheck away from being in the same spot as where the people are,” Longval said. “It’s not what a lot of people think. It’s a lot of abuse they grew up with. It’s parents who started feeding their kids alcohol at four years old. People who have had their bodies being burnt by people. Huge abuse. And mental illness, we have some people who don’t have addictions but they have a mental illness. There’s just a lot of selfish attitudes out there that don’t put themselves in the other person’s shoes and want to judge and condemn.”

As for the success of the overnight shelter, Longval stated that she’s been pleasantly surprised.

“I’m super excited because I wasn’t sure people would be able to stay the night,” Longval said. “I thought we’d have a lot of people leaving in the midst of the night because they can’t handle it any longer and have to go do their thing. Rarely do people live in the middle of the night. They stay the whole time. That’s that much longer they’ll be sober.”