

## **CATHOLIC CHARITIES OPENS 'THE SPARK,' A RESOURCE CENTER FOR YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS EXPERIENCING HOUSING INSTABILITY**

Walla Walla, Wash. – The community is invited to join Catholic Charities Walla Walla (CCWW) for an open house celebration of its new walk-in resource center, The Spark, offering supportive services and other essential assistance for individuals ages 12-24 years who are experiencing homelessness or are unstably housed. The event is set for **Thursday, September 5 between 3-6pm at 30 North Roosevelt Street in Walla Walla**. All are welcome to drop by to see the new facility, enjoy light refreshments, meet the staff, and learn about the services offered.

“We are working to connect with at-risk young people who lack permanent housing and help them overcome barriers to set themselves up for success,” explains Heidi Meliah, Youth Services Director who works closely on the project with Ruthell Martinez, Program Manager for The Spark.

The Spark builds on the success of The Loft, a temporary housing project focused on youth, which helped to cut Walla Walla’s count of homeless young people and youth experiencing homelessness in half between 2020-2021. That effort, led locally by Tim Meliah, CCEW Regional Director, was among the most successful projects of the state-wide Anchor Community Initiative.

CCWW facilitates a Youth Action Board made up of 17 young people who have experience with housing instability to better understand the gaps in services they experience, and to harness their collective voice to implement community-wide efforts. The Spark was envisioned *by* young people *for* young people to address these gaps.

“We’re able to offer everything from the initial list developed by the Youth Advisory Board – and more,” Meliah explains. There are activities such as access to laundry, showers, hygiene products and clothing, computers for homework and employment research, private meeting areas to practice job interviews, and connections to an array of services and support from other community agencies and partners.

On-site case managers and multi-disciplinary teams coordinate services needed by participants, including support for family reconciliation and the identification of other services these youth may need to obtain permanent stable housing.

Collaboration with community partners is a key element of The Spark's approach to helping youth and young adults become stably housed. Partnering agencies can refer directly to The Spark's team, and youth who access the center can be put in contact with external service providers, such as behavioral health or physical health support, education systems, legal support, substance use support and other resources.

"We see the young people who need help to access the services that exist to support them," explains Martinez, "and we're focused on doing all we can to get these individuals the assistance that will get them on the right track."

"We serve a broad range of youth – from 12 to 24 – and we're tailoring services to very different needs within that age bracket," Meliah explains. The Spark offers different hours for different age groups – for instance, concentrating young adult services in the morning when the younger population is in school, then providing after-school assistance for those under 18.

"We're very mindful of keeping these age groups separate," Meliah explains. "We have the flexibility of making services available by appointment as well."

Martinez adds: "Our goal is to help the youth who walk through the door achieve safety and stability by creating a supportive team, emphasizing the importance of relationships. Many youth and young adults are often vulnerable and scared, making relationship-building crucial. This begins with our outreach team being present in schools and collaborating with other community partners. By listening carefully, respecting their concerns, and working together to meet their needs, we aim to build the trust and rapport that will help them progress."

The Spark is grateful to the many partnering organizations and agencies that are collaborating in this initiative. "We could not do this work without them," Meliah concludes. "It is truly the 'Walla Walla Way.'"

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- NOTE TO MEDIA: Please email [spark@cceasternwa.org](mailto:spark@cceasternwa.org) or call 509-601-3637 to confirm your presence Sept. 5 so we can have team members available to speak with you.