

House of Charity Transition WHITE PAPER

For 66 years, Catholic Charities Eastern WA has operated the House of Charity low barrier homeless shelter. Like most Catholic Charities programs over our 112-year history, the House of Charity was started because a homeless shelter that accepted any person, in any condition at any time was a service that no other group or organization was willing or able to do in Spokane. Throughout our history, Catholic Charities has always chosen to do the hardest work and the work that was not being done by others in the community.

In 1997, the decision was made to expand and relocate the House of Charity from its long-time home on W. Main Street to its current location, which was chosen by the City of Spokane in late 1998 because that part of the City, which has now become the highly successful and developed University District was nearly abandoned and extremely run down in the late 90's. The new House of Charity construction was completed in the Spring of 2000, and we began operations in our current location.

Over the past 24 years in its current location, a great deal has changed within the population of our chronically street homeless brothers and sisters. One of the most important areas of change has been Catholic Charities' own logistical, medical, and spiritual learning about the needs of this very fragile group of men and women. Building a large congregate shelter, with an enormous dorm like sleeping area, with beds being only inches apart, where nearly 150 could sleep mostly in the same large room was considered the best and most efficient practice in 2000 from both a health/safety and an economic viewpoint.

However, times have changed, and a good organization is able to respond to changing times. Over the past decades, principles of trauma informed care, a better understanding of the acuity of behavioral health needs and learnings from transmittable disease research have shown us that large congregate shelter sleeping environments do not always provide the best physical place of care for individuals experiencing homelessness. Most importantly, our own clients experiencing homelessness have told us in recent years that they prefer to have some level of private sleeping space--sharing their very personal and valid reasons why congregate shelter is not ideal. We strive to be nimble and to change with the needs of the community, and so we have taken these learnings into our hearts and into our discernment processes. We have also been blessed to be able to prove our learnings in real time in program environments like Catalyst where this population has had amazing success in a non-congregate setting. Catalyst has become the obvious new best practice for this important work.

Times have also changed in many positive ways with regards to homelessness. In the past 3-5 years, several other low barrier shelter providers have come into existence and are willing and able to provide shelter to any/all of the homeless population in our community. After so many decades, we are no longer the only organization who can or would do this important work. We are blessed by these other organizations.

All of the above has led us to the conclusion that we should investigate the transition of the House of Charity into a new model and at a new location. Our new model hopes to have a re-focus on the most fragile and most underserved part of the chronically street homeless population. In a new location with trauma informed, private, individual sleeping and living spaces, our goal will be to focus on providing specialized services for individuals who are medically fragile in need of respite care. We will have the opportunity to provide more specialized focus on individuals who are senior citizens, who have complex medical issues or who are coming out of extended hospital stays. For the first time we will also have the opportunity to focus on supporting individuals who are experiencing end-of-life care needs. Our goal will be to partner with providers who specialize in Hospice care to bring these services directly on-site—and of course continue to be open to serving all who want to engage in our program.

It is possible that the current House of Charity name and location could sunset after 66 wonderful years of amazing service to the community. It has accomplished its mission. The building would be re-purposed in some way, but we would no longer serve, sleep, or feed people at this site if this transition moves forward. There is still much work to be done and dialogue to be had before this transition could take place. We are deeply proud of the work we have done at the House of Charity for over 6 decades and we will continue to do that work with new understandings and new partnerships leading to great outcomes for those we help. Catholic Charities stands ready to focus on the future of our homeless services efforts.