

Winter Youth Shelter Proposal

Questions and Answers from Congregational Conversations after worship on October 20 & 27, 2019

*Northwest Youth Services (NWYS) staff Emilio Vela (Executive Director)
and Emerson (Coordinator for The Ground Floor) joined us on 10/20, and Emerson on 10/27.*

The Ground Floor update: 286 youth served so far, with an average of about 20 guests per day. There have been 3000 contacts with youth at The Ground Floor. Emerson described a gap where The Ground Floor was unable to provide shelter for a youth being released from a treatment program, and so lost an opportunity to build relationships and trust so that better support could be provided.

Emilio said NWYS coordinates closely with City of Bellingham and Whatcom County. He expressed gratitude for our congregation. He described concerns for the safety of youth (especially teens) in adult shelters. City and County Councils are supportive of a better shelter option for youth. A winter youth shelter at First Congregational Church would be possible because of The Ground Floor. NWYS also has the PAD, as a shelter option for 13-17-year-olds.

Q: What is the format for the proposed shelter?

A: Thirty-five beds for young people ages 13-25 (same age range served by The Ground Floor), to operate nightly for 3 winter months: December, January, and February. During those months the shelter will be open from 8:00 pm to 8:00 am every night. From 8:00 am to 9:00 am shelter guests will be able to use The Ground Floor for showers and to get ready for the day. The Ground Floor will open from 9:00 am-1:00 pm.

The proposed shelter would use The Ground Floor entrance, and use The Ground Floor space for welcome, intake, bathrooms, and showers. A temporary sleeping space would be set up in the unfinished basement area, using about half of the space currently used by Interfaith Coalition for furniture storage. First Congregational's Mission and Justice Board has allocated 2019 Local Mission Funds to assist Interfaith Coalition as needed with moving and storing the items that would need to be moved out of the church to make room for the temporary shelter. First Congregational Church Trustees and NWYS would sign an addendum to the Ground Floor lease agreement (or other legal agreement) to cover use of the temporary shelter space. This commitment would be for 3 months, from 12/1/19 through 2/29/19.

Q: How will First Congregational Church members have input into this decision?

A: This proposal is scheduled for a congregational meeting and decision on **Sunday, November 10, 2019** after worship.

Q: How would the shelter be staffed?

A: There would be two NWYS staff always awake. Emerson (The Ground Floor Coordinator) will oversee staff. An experienced and capable Ground Floor staff person will be the overnight lead. NWYS hopes to minimize new hires by coordinating with other NWYS programs and bringing back some former staff. Emerson will initially be on site at opening and closing. There will also be opportunities for volunteers. Emilio described the training for NWYS staff, including de-escalation, intervention, and CPR. Bellingham Police have offered support including increased patrols if needed. Emilio described how the Ground Floor program has changed the way that NWYS can connect and build relationships with youth. City of Bellingham is prepared to commit substantial funding, and Whatcom County is also considering funding.

Q: Will younger youth be safe in this shelter? Are 24-year-olds too old to mix with younger youth?

A: NWYS is also seeking funding to increase capacity of the PAD program and to provide transportation from The Ground Floor to the PAD for younger youth who would be better served at the PAD.

The temporary shelter will be planned and staffed to ensure safety, including the requirement that staff always maintain line of sight to guest areas, and some wireless camera options to maintain observation of all spaces. Young people under age 25 are the most vulnerable people experiencing homelessness in Bellingham. NWYS has found that 23-24-year-olds are often very supportive of the younger youth in NWYS programs. NWYS will update us when they hear from the county about additional funding to increase services for minor youth.

Q: Will the winter youth shelter have security rules like the severe weather shelters did, where guests were not allowed to leave once they signed in?

A: City of Bellingham will fund the shelter but supports NWYS operating it according to NWYS program and values. NWYS does not plan to require youth to stay after checking in, but they will have a curfew around 10pm, and youth will not be allowed to re-enter if they leave after curfew. The outdoor smoking area will be monitored by staff.

Q: What will youth do from 1pm – 8pm?

A: Live their lives, as they do now outside Ground Floor hours. Youth sign a guest agreement and code of conduct that includes an agreement to be good neighbors and to not loiter outside the church or elsewhere in the neighborhood. NWYS will monitor and will respond as needed.

Q: What will this cost the church? (utilities, insurance, security, parking, disturbances?)

A: Trustees have done some careful research and believe the costs would be minimal!

Incurred costs for the church would be very minimal. NWYS and City of Bellingham will cover increased heating costs. The Ground Floor will provide a battery-powered EXIT sign. Interfaith Coalition may need help moving and/or storing their items that are currently in the proposed shelter space (Mission and Justice has allocated up to \$1200 in 2019 local mission funds to assist Interfaith with this).

Trustees are reviewing the proposal with our insurance company to make sure our liability and umbrella policies are appropriate for the current value of the building, which increased because of building The Ground Floor.

Q: Have there been any unanticipated consequences with The Ground Floor?

A: David expected to spend significant time addressing concerns of church family and neighbors, but there have been very few of these conversations. The Ground Floor had one incident report in its first six months, and that involved a youth who needed some first aid for a minor injury sustained elsewhere.

The Ground Floor has been “hugely successful” in connecting young people with permanent housing, because young people like to be in The Ground Floor space, so they show up regularly and can get consistent support. Sharon described a situation with an RV in the parking lot, and Ground Floor staff were able to provide a jump start. New people have been attending First Congregational Church in response to our neighborhood outreach about The Ground Floor. Sharon also noted that church staff have developed greater clarity re: boundaries, roles, and resources, which helps in many situations. Emilio described that NWYS has had opportunities to hire youth for different jobs.

Q: Can we bring food?

A: The Ground Floor has had some great support with food, including local farm produce and breakfast items donated from a local hotel. Interested First Congregational members could

help pick up donations, and there may also be other volunteer opportunities that arise once the shelter is operating.

Q: What if more than 35 young people show up?

A: Teens 13-17 years old could be transferred to the PAD. NWYS is working closely with the Opportunity Council Homeless Outreach Team and is closely networked with other organizations to help anyone seeking shelter find the safest possible options for the night. NWYS staff are experienced and skilled at helping youth strategize for safety and survival overnight.

Q: Would we consider extending beyond February if winter weather continues?

A: This proposal is only for 12/1/19 – 2/29/19. There could be future conversations with City of Bellingham, but there would be no commitment beyond 2/29/19.

Q: Can youth reserve a space for the three months the winter youth shelter would operate?

A: No, it would be first come / first serve each night.

Q: Will there be a line outside waiting for the shelter to open?

A: NWYS will ask youth not to show up early. NWYS is working with City of Bellingham to minimize the time anyone would have to wait outside. NWYS staff are skilled at responding if people are waiting outside. David has time available to respond to any neighborhood concerns.

Q: Would guests remove their personal belongings from the shelter space each day?

A: NWYS hopes to provide lockers for shelter guests.

Q: Will bedding be provided?

A: NWYS will provide bedding and will launder bedding either through a laundry service or a local laundromat. Guests may use The Ground Floor laundry facilities for their personal clothing, but NWYS will not wash bedding at The Ground Floor (don't have capacity).

Q: Tell us more about financing....

A: City of Bellingham has committed to funding. Whatcom County has also been asked to contribute to expand The Ground Floor's open hours and to contribute to the cost for a winter shelter.

Q: Why wouldn't we do this?

A: When we decided to move ahead with The Ground Floor project, we had a lot of long conversations with each other and with our neighbors. This is a much faster timeline for a decision. The proposed shelter would displace some storage for Interfaith Coalition's ministries. There may be questions about building security.

Q: Why WOULD we consider this so quickly? Is this too much, too fast?

A: Emilio outlined the timeline that has brought us to this proposal with a request for a decision by early November. Emilio started at NWYS in May. Discussions about winter shelter needs began in June and July. Serious talks with City of Bellingham were held in September. Government processes can be unavoidably slow. Everyone has been aware of the urgency of safe winter shelter space, after last winter's severe weather. Emerson noted his work with The Ground Floor and said he is confident NWYS can do this well, and he committed to continuing and increasing conversations with David and others to stay in touch about how it is going.

Q: Is NWYS exploring any other spaces?

A: City of Bellingham is planning a variety of emergency cold weather shelters, but First Congregational Church is the only location being asked to consider hosting a winter youth shelter. This is because it fits to have the shelter coordinate with the Ground Floor space.

Q: Is the City of Bellingham compromising safety or waiving building codes in order to rush approval for a temporary shelter? Are regulations being followed so that people will be safe? Would the City really approve a sleeping space for 35 people with no windows and limited exits?

A: Trustees were initially hesitant and shared these concerns. Trustees have worked hard to get answers in a short time period, and they have learned that the proposed shelter use would fully meet current City of Bellingham codes. If the space were to be used fulltime, it would require windows, but this temporary use does not. City codes allow 1 exit for more than 35 people. The wall coverings actually exceed the sheetrock code for fire. The basement has a sprinkler system for fire protection. Overall the proposal exceeds current building and safety codes for this use, so there would not be any compromise or waiver of code requirements. NWYS would have 2 staff awake at all times. The sanitation (toilet and shower facilities) available in The Ground Floor is adequate for the proposed numbers and satisfies codes.

Q: How does this process compare with the thoughtfulness of planning for The Ground Floor? It feels like a parent unexpectedly pregnant with a second child when their first carefully planned baby just reached their first birthday ...

A: There are major differences between the temporary winter shelter proposal and the Ground Floor project, including a vast difference in cost, a short term vs. long term building use commitment, and a much lower need for investment and commitment by the congregation.

Q: What if it's freezing cold and snowing on November 15 and the shelter doesn't plan to open until 12/1?

A: NWYS will use their current systems and resources; they are used to strategizing with youth about how to survive.

Q: If we say no, what happens? What if we don't have enough information to decide?

A: Timeline and safety questions are extraordinarily important. Please talk with Trustees and each other to try to get your questions answered. If the congregation decides that this is not the right time for us to host this program, youth will seek shelter elsewhere during the winter months, but there will not be another dedicated Winter Youth Shelter in Bellingham this year.