

The Heart of Homelessness

CHAPTER 3

...What does the Old Firehouse Assistance Center provide and why is it located just off the Woodstock Square?

You may think: *“I don’t really have anything against helping the homeless, but I don’t think the City should have opened an assistance center in the Old Firehouse on South Street. It’s too close to the Square, is on a major entrance way to the downtown, is in a residential area, and too close to churches and schools. Not only are we attracting homeless from other communities, but we’ve provided them a place to hang out. Every day we see a bunch of homeless hanging around outside the Old Firehouse Assistance Center in the middle of our downtown drinking, sleeping and harassing passersby. I don’t like to drive by, let alone walk by, and visitors to the City are thinking, ‘what a dump Woodstock is’. It was a dumb idea to put an assistance center there.”*

Here are the facts: In 2014 and 2015, long before the Old Firehouse Assistance Center existed, businesses and residents began to express concerns over the presence and activities of homeless individuals in the Park in the Square. At about the same time, there was discussion among social service providers throughout McHenry County about the need for a fixed site that would offer transitional housing and support services to the larger McHenry County homeless population to expand or supplement the efforts of Pioneer Center. Unfortunately, those efforts languished primarily because of high cost estimates and concerns over sustainable financing, the question of which entity would serve as lead agency, and of paramount concern, where such a facility would be located.

Concerns about the homeless on the Square continued and there was a call for the City to do something. In the absence of action on a larger county-wide solution and to address the growing call for action and resolution in the City, an invitation was extended to service providers and interested individuals to attend a Roundtable for Homeless Service Providers at Stage Left Café on October 23rd, 2015. Nearly 35 people attended the meeting and the challenges addressed were:

- How do we provide assistance for people who are homeless in the coming winter months?
- How can we better manage inappropriate behaviors exhibited by some homeless people on the Square?
- How can we better coordinate resources as we look to providing for immediate needs, including food, shelter and clothing, of people who are homeless in our community?

In response to these questions, the group agreed to focus on the following short-term priority objectives:

- Create a responsive resource guide for use by all agencies, the Police Department and City.
- Work with Pioneer/PADS to extend weekday, daytime warming center services over weekends.
- Work with the McHenry County Housing Authority and local churches to develop plans for using the Old Fire Station on South Street as an intake and warming center.

Why was the Old Firehouse chosen as the site for a homeless assistance center?

There is rarely an ideal location for a homeless assistance center. Through consultation with service providers, it was determined a center would require accessible space large enough to

provide a check-in station, offices for confidential intake processing, a common warming/cooling room, restroom and shower facilities, lockers for short-term personal item storage, a kitchen, a washer and dryer, and storage areas. Upon consideration of these interests, and given the facts that 1) the City of Woodstock owns the Old Firehouse facility which was used on a very limited basis, or not at all, and 2) by virtue of being a firehouse, the facility could immediately offer many of the necessary accommodations with little additional investment, it was determined to consider the site as a site of opportunity.

There were other considerations:

- The City of Woodstock has certain statutorily assigned duties it is required to fulfill with its limited taxpayer dollars. The provision of social services is outside the scope of those duties as such programs are considered to be the jurisdiction and responsibility of other units of government. In this instance, that means the City should not expend limited municipal funds for improvements to a facility that may be seen *solely* as accommodations to a homeless assistance center. However, improvements that could support a future City use of a facility such as a senior or youth center, and also the short-term or interim use for homeless center functions, would be appropriate. Further, the cost of improvements exclusively associated with a homeless assistance center could be covered through grant funding with the added benefit of improving a municipal facility.
- Under the same considered limitations, the City should not use municipal funds to hire personnel or expend time to secure and assign volunteers to manage a center.
- It is desirable to have a centrally located facility in the county seat where court services and social agency services are provided. At the same time, it was of concern that a centrally located facility, such as the Old Firehouse, would be in the heart of the downtown and near the Square, the very area of expressed concern by residents and businesses.

Given all of these considerations, it was determined the best opportunity for *immediate* action was to utilize the Old Firehouse, under the auspices of the McHenry County Housing Authority.

In January 2016, the Old Firehouse Assistance Center (OFAC) opened for one day a week. In May it opened for two days per week and then in November, 2016 expanded services to three days per week with a designated on-site manager. At the end of October, 2017 the center began offering services five days per week, Monday through Friday, 9:00 am to 3:00 pm.

OFAC is an entity of the McHenry County Housing Authority (MCHA) which provides the staff, manages the site, and coordinates the volunteers and service providers who come to the site. The City of Woodstock owns the building and provides MCHA use of the building free of charge.

Specifically, the center provides services to people who are homeless and who have continually resided in McHenry County for a minimum of the past 90 days. Those who are not homeless and do not meet the residency requirement are not allowed to use the OFAC. Certain exceptions may be made for Veterans, individuals recently hospitalized, and victims of domestic violence or natural disasters.

OFAC services for people who are homeless begin with a background check and comprehensive intake process to determine individual needs. Specific offered services include:

- Hot showers
- Snacks and meals
- Haircuts
- Medical care
- Housing opportunity information
- Social service assistance referrals and support
- Immediate help for cases of critical need
- Other individualized assistance as needed

By the end of 2017, the center had served 425 different individuals since opening in January, 2016 and placed 43 individuals into permanent housing. All individuals go through an initial intake process which includes a background check and identifies specific areas of need. Many have been referred to social service resources for employment, addiction counseling, medical assistance and other individual needs.

Additional information regarding the Old Firehouse Assistance Center, services provided, and ways to volunteer or provide assistance is available by emailing srose@mchenrycountyhousing.org or mbennett@mchenrycountyhousing.org or calling 815-337-9809.

Why can't we suspend services at the site until a permanent, fixed site is established?

Immediately closing or suspending the efforts of the OFAC is certainly possible, but to what end? It is important to consider the following:

- The need is not going to go away or lessen. In fact, under current state and national circumstances, the need is likely to increase.
- People who are homeless, as all people, need to be someplace.

If the Old Firehouse Assistance Center were to close tomorrow, it would only serve to displace the homeless population yet again. In all likelihood, homeless individuals would return to frequenting the Park in the Square, Emricson Park, Woodstock Public Library and retail centers in the community. Under such circumstances, the opportunity to provide services, as well as oversee and manage the inappropriate behaviors of the few, would be more challenging.

Would the homeless issue *appear* less critical? Probably, because the individuals would be dispersed throughout the community, as they were when campsites on private and public property existed. It is the *out of sight, out of mind* phenomenon. The number of homeless people and their associated needs will not diminish, however. Woodstock will continue to be the county seat and the homeless population will continue to be in the community because the court system and social service agencies will continue to be located here.

While suspending the services of the OFAC might solve the problem in the eyes of some by displacing the population away from a very visible location on South Street, the ultimate solution would be a permanent, fixed site center providing emergency shelter and needed social services on a county-wide basis. Until such a center is located and functional, the Old Firehouse Assistance Center, under the management of the McHenry County Housing Authority with the assistance of numerous volunteers and support groups and agencies, continues to be a productive and successful effort.

What can we do to improve the situation in the meantime?

There continues to be a concern about the inappropriate behavior of a few homeless people who gather in and around the OFAC and the downtown area. And, it must be recognized the public drinking, panhandling, fighting, lewd behavior, and saying or yelling inappropriate things...in general, the public disturbance created by these few...appeared excessive in 2017. Such inappropriate behaviors cannot be tolerated.

In an effort to better manage inappropriate behaviors on behalf of the few, the City has worked with the State Attorney's Staff and municipal lawyers to amend the Woodstock City Code by adding or amending ordinances in order to justifiably and defensibly hold individuals accountable for irresponsible and/or illegal behavior. As a result, the Police Department will be able to more proactively and aggressively work to curb such behaviors. Further, the City is working with the McHenry County Housing Authority to address protocols and methods that will reduce inappropriate behaviors in and around the OFAC.

It must also be recognized that two community churches serve as PADS sites providing overnight accommodations during the season. The City, Pioneer Center, Housing Authority and PADS site managers will collectively work to manage inappropriate behaviors at those sites, as well.

Residents who observe inappropriate and/or illegal behavior on behalf of any individuals within the community are encouraged to immediately contact the Woodstock Police Department by calling 911 in an emergency or 815-338-2131 to report non-emergency associated activities or situations.

###