

SOS

► continued from A1

issues involved logistics of when people were to be checked in by Koochiching County staff and whether volunteers were needed to stay overnight at the locations. “It got more cumbersome than we anticipated.”

SOS Board member Pat Bjorum said the rotation could not be continued. “It worked, we helped people, but it was not sustainable model for us,” she said.

Mortenson said the model at first drew many volunteers for overnight stays, but few guests. People in need weren’t sure if it was safe and confidential. As the guest numbers increased, volunteers were pulling back because of the earlier lack of guests. Rotating meals, air mattresses and blankets among the three sites also became troublesome, she said.

“We thought we needed to put on the brakes and regroup and figure out how to best meet the needs,” Mortenson said. Hotels were often fully booked in summers, but a large room at the Rambler Hotel was rented year around and used to house people in need for a period. She credited Pat Arnold, owner, for working with SOS.

Mortenson said SOS is fully supported by community donations because it cannot seek grants until it has nonprofit status. She said an apartment was not immediately leased because of the uncertainty of relying totally on community donations.

SOS, she said, has regular contributors and Holy Trinity Church has donated proceeds from its fall supper twice.

“We have phenomenal community support, above anything we could imagine,” she said.

That support is what has led to the leasing last month of a one-bedroom apart-

ment, already being used by a family displaced by a fire in their own apartment.

While the apartment is small, it is better for family situations than the hotel room, Mortenson said.

“We are thrilled to have the apartment,” she said. “It means our community has embraced us. They trust what the board is doing — when it’s so tight with fundraising these days, and we all do what we can with what we’ve got, for them to trust we are doing the best good with their funds means the world to us.”

People in need of housing may be referred to Community Services staff Derek Lunser or Jen Stevens who will assess their needs and help them contact the appropriate resources, including SOS, Mortenson said.

If the shelter is available, county staff will conduct an in-take process.

“Unfortunately, it’s not for long-term shelter,” she said. “We don’t have the funding to support that. But we’re trying to help people who are likely to get housing quickly — maybe they will start employment or have housing being set up.”

Mortenson said some people must be turned away from SOS when the shelter is full. They have provided gas cards to help people get to family or shelter elsewhere, she said. And The Salvation Army may provide a night at a hotel.

“It’s hard to send people away, but we’re trying to do the most good with the funding,” she said. “It’s good funding, but limited funding.”

Mortenson said SOS plans to hire a case manager after getting nonprofit status and attaining grants. A case manager would make connecting SOS guests with the resources to help them secure permanent housing their No. 1 priority.

The continuation and evolution of SOS is a result of establishing relationships with service providers, the

community and the SOS Board of Directors, Mortenson said.

Gaining nonprofit status would be another step in the SOS evolution.

“It means we could go after grants,” Mortenson said. “It’s a little scary that we’re all volunteer at this point.”

While writing grant applications would be conducted in volunteers’ spare time, it’s something about which board members are passionate and will do well, she said. Grants could mean providing another apartment and she said the board is developing a strategic plan to guide the future.

“It’s really coming together,” Mortenson said.

THE INVISIBLES

Board member Pat Bjorum said many people in Borderland aren’t aware there are homeless people in the community.

“They get very good at being invisible because of dignity,” said Bjorum, who is also a pastoral minister and member of the St. Thomas’ Social Concerns Committee. “We have people in cars, but you don’t see them sleeping in cars. They are out of most people’s range of vision. I wouldn’t know about it except for work I do. These are the people you see when you go into the library — all day long, or in the laundromat a lot in the winter, or standing in the gas stations that are open all the time. Pretty soon, your eyes open and you start noticing things you didn’t before.”

Mortenson also said homeless people couch hop between friends and family. And she said often, friends and family living in subsidized housing put their own housing at risk by allowing someone in to stay with them.

For families who do not own their own homes, “It’s a different kind of poverty,” she said. “It’s often a lack of resources to stability.”

SOS is intended to bridge the gap and provide a place

HOME

► continued from A1

International Falls — where two of her three children and three of her seven grandchildren live — where she spent more time in jail.

“When I got out, I had no place to go,” she said. She got clothes from the St. Thomas Catholic Church Clothes Closet and other assistance from The Salvation Army, which provided a hotel room for a couple nights.

She ended up a with family member’s travel trailer parked at a friend’s house. But the trailer wasn’t insulated and she couldn’t stay the winter.

She tried living with a friend, but that didn’t work out and again, she found herself homeless.

She went to Koochiching County Community Services and connected with Amy Mortenson of KOOTASCA Community Action. Mortenson is also a member of the Servants of Shelter Board.

“She got hold of the right people,” Nash said. Nash found shelter and the services she needed to get herself in a better position.

She spent two months at a hotel room the Servants of Shelter had rented for people in need. Her dogs stayed with family. She was able to keep her belongings safe at the hotel room, which included a microwave, refrigerator, and a roll-out bed for someone else who may need the SOS services. She was also able to have her grand kids over for a couple hours to visit and have hot cocoa.

“They were so good to me,” she said.

“I got a place to stay, and that got me on my feet.”

She’s now living in an apartment that has allowed her dogs, age 12 and 13, and is working at McDonald’s Family Restaurant.

She said she’s able to enjoy the things other people do, like helping out on a day off from work when a granddaughter is sick and her mom can’t miss a day from work.

“I know what they did for me,” said Nash of SOS. “I don’t know what would have happened to me. It was freezing cold outside. I had someone to watch my dogs, but no place for me to stay. If it hadn’t been for the help I got, I really don’t know where I’d be, or if I would be even still alive.”

Nash describes being homeless as terrifying. She said she always had a place to stay until her parents died a few years ago. She said she could spend a night here and there with her kids, but they and their families had little extra room to offer.

Being homeless caused anxiety and associated health problems, she said, causing a few hospital stays to get her blood pressure straightened out.

Nash now counts herself among the lucky people who live in a community that helps its own. She can’t say enough good about SOS and the people, including Diane Briggs, who guided her through that time.

“It was so scary,” she said. “You have to jump through a lot of hoops to prove yourself, but it’s worth it. There are a lot of wonderful people out there.”

Laurel Beager

SFIA

► continued from A1

owners in the program have their own forest managers who monitor the forests and ensure the SFIA program guidelines are being followed. “I have little concern about them,” he said. “That’s what they do, that’s the reason they’re in business.”

Craig Halla, Minnesota property manager for Molpus, said the company is reviewing the legislative auditor’s report on the SFIA program.

“Minnesota has a strong interest in the sustainability and viability of working forests, including those on private lands,” Halla told The Journal Thursday. “Also, SFIA delivers significant public recreational access to private lands and

regional economic development benefits that do not appear to be addressed in the report. The long-term viability of private timberland ownership in Minnesota depends on a program like SFIA. We look forward to discussing these issues with the Minnesota Legislature and other key policy makers on how best to move forward.”

Dill said payments to the landowners in the program are intended to discourage forest ownership segmentation and to ensure timber on private lands is available to the companies that need it to make products.

The auditor’s report said payments made to some landowners were larger than the property taxes paid. And that’s OK, said Dill.

“I don’t look at the payment as to specifically lower

the property tax of a taxpayer,” he said. “When we do the program, we’re buying something. When you buy something, you’re not lowering the property tax of the people that sell it.”

Dill said the program buys assurance the land will be used for forest stewardship. He said property taxes vary from county to county and those in Koochiching are lower than in Beltrami County.

“Sometimes the payments are more than taxes, and that’s no problem as long as the property is managed right,” he said. “Are there plans in place? Who is monitoring those plans? That’s what needs to be looked at.”

Dill said he expects discussion and possibly legislation about the SFIA program at the 2104 Legislature.

Before that, he said he

wants to hear ideas from small and large landowners in the program.

Molpus, said Dill, is an important part of the program, which includes about 2,300 landowners this year with more than 737,000 enrolled acres.

In May, a bill removed a \$100,000 cap for large landowners in the program. That allowed Molpus to keep its property in Koochiching and St. Louis counties in the program. The cap reduced the \$2 million the company had been receiving in payments.

Dill said he worked hard to get the cap removed and funding in place for the payments for two years.

“We convinced them of the importance of the program to the economy, the community and the recreation for people that don’t live up here,” he said.

SCHOOL

► continued from A1

he would in the meantime, gather additional information for the board.

PROM CHANGES

Also, Monday, Cory Netland, the board’s student member, asked board members to consider changing the age of those who can attend prom.

The board took no action on Netland’s proposal.

The school has a policy that prom attendees can be from another school, but must be juniors or seniors in high school.

Netland, however, proposed the board allow students who are out of high school to attend prom if they are up to age 19.

“(Raising the age) can increase the want and desire

for kids who want to attend an event like this,” he said.

Netland said he surveyed 80 students to see if they would support his proposal. He reported 50 students responded yes; 28 said no; and two gave a different answer.

In addition, Netland said he talked to officials of five different schools in the area, all of which said they have a policy that prom attendees must be under the age of 21.

Netland said the prom committee is also in support of his proposal.

“It will bring money for the prom committee itself,” he said of students who may want to bring someone older to the event.

He continued that included in his proposal is a requirement that students and their dates fill out a permission slip to attend Falls High’s prom.



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