

'Sleep Out' Fundraiser for Unhoused

By Peggy Bair

Sister Vickie Perkins, SCL director of Leavenworth Interfaith Community of Hope was exhausted after the initial year of COVID. On December 31, 2020, she retired.

Well, sort of.

Unhappy with the options she was seeing for housing the unhoused as they revolved through the door of the shelter, the restless soul of Sister Vickie couldn't step into retirement without addressing that dangling thread: what to do with homeless whose next step could be housing – if only there was something affordable to help make that transition.

“When I left, I knew the one thing we hadn't been able to do at the shelter was housing,” Perkins said. “When they came in for housing, we really struggled because we couldn't find good, affordable housing.”

Once again, the tiny powerhouse who had pulled together efforts from 35 churches and a bank of volunteers and contributors to build Leavenworth Community of Hope shelter – now engaged in solving the next step to the community homeless issue: finding affordable options for people struggling to get off the streets, back into jobs, homes and reintegrated into society with dignity.

“We pulled about 30 people together and said ‘What do we think? Should we try to attack this? Should we look at it? And they said, ‘Yeah, we should.’ Twenty of those people signed up to help. Those people became our (Leavenworth Attainable Housing) board,” Perkins said.

A house bequeathed by a donor became the first LAH home for Leavenworth Attainable Housing. In May 2022, renovations were completed, and the home was officially dedicated in a ceremonial blessing of the house. It became a home for a single parent with a disabled child.

After the first house was completed, more donors stepped up and Perkins continued to pursue funding and housing options. St. Paul Lutheran Church and School made five homes the church owns available to be managed by Leavenworth Attainable Housing. Independence Baptist church donated a house. The City of Leavenworth granted money from ARPA funds to buy duplexes and some small houses. There are presently a total of nine houses interspersed throughout the community now managed through the LAH program. Futures plans are for 20-unit apartment complexes to be completed sometime in 2027.

January 1, 2023, Leavenworth, Kansas was accepted into the DePaul USA Attainable Housing program. The program operates out of nine cities.

“All of them are big cities except us,” Perkins said. “We are the smallest one by far. But they were willing to accept us into the program.”

That partnership will help LAH navigate many aspects of the program.

“When we got the (ARPA) money from the city,” Perkins explained, “for instance, I don’t know how to write up a bid for a contractor, but DePaul does. So, they wrote it up for us. We couldn’t have done that by ourselves.”

Rent cost through LAH is one third of household income, which is the affordability aspect of the program. LAH differs from HUD Section 8 housing in that, while they both address affordability, LAH adds attainability.

“We called it Leavenworth Attainable Housing because, while you might be able to afford the rent – you can’t get into the house because you don’t have the deposit, the first month’s rent and all that stuff. So, that’s the attainable part,” Perkins said. “We don’t charge a deposit and we pay the utilities.”

LAH also adds access to medical and mental health services and a full financial advocate and community support team, which is the sustainable part of the program.

“We have got to put things around people to give them the support they need,” Perkins said.

Presently, the LAH program operates on about \$300,000 in donations a year – with more funding needed for the future projects.

On June 23, 2023, to bring both awareness of homelessness and to raise funds, a “Leavenworth Sleepout” will take place over one night, from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m., in an outdoor space at 4th and Chestnut. The event starts with a buffet dinner but the sleepout will be outdoors, rain or shine, for those who wish to have at least a temporary experience of what it is like to be unhoused. It is “an opportunity to be in solidarity with the homeless for a night.” Breakfast is served the next morning.

Participants have three options. They can attend the earlier part of the event and then go home, they can stay outside for the event and come and go when they choose, or they can donate without attending at all, Perkins said.

“Some people are going to bring tents, some people are going to bring sleeping bags,” Sister Vickie said.

The cost to participate is \$250, which will be covered for many participants who find sponsors.

However, she said, “no sleeper will be turned away and any donation will be appreciated.” A registration form can be filled out in advance <https://forms.gle/PaKTohPha2z8u5WP7> or participants can contact via email vperkindsscl@gmail.com. Participants can also register by calling 913-530-4535.

The goal of the event is to raise \$25,000 with proceeds towards Leavenworth Attainable Housing.

Perkins’ close work with the unhoused over the years has taught her that homelessness can happen to just about anyone.

“A lot of times, it’s just one thing that’s happened,” Perkins said. “Like, a major car expense and they don’t have any savings. So, you can’t drive now, you can’t go to work, you lose your job, and then it just spirals. People don’t want to be homeless. And we’re never going to end homelessness unless we can have housing provided. Because if you can’t afford housing and can’t afford to stay in the housing, you’re going to stay homeless. The only way to make a significant impact is to have housing available to them.”