

Introductory Speech given by Eran Fowler, Interim Director of the Poverello Center, at the August 10, 2011 Community Conversation

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**The History of the Poverello Center**

In 1974, a group of community members united to create a “house of hospitality” to be named the Poverello Center.

It was established as a ministry to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, and shelter the homeless in the Franciscan spirit of peace and care of others. The initial focus was to provide for the most basic of needs, food.

What began as a soup kitchen to feed the hungry evolved into an emergency shelter in November of 1981, acting as a safe haven for those alone in the night with no place to go.

In describing the driving mission of these early years, founding member Reverend George Dumais described the Poverello Center not as a bureaucracy, “but a venture in unity . . . an understanding place where those who can give freely of what they have, and those who need receive freely . . . where there is no need of an apology . . . where acceptance makes people feel better about themselves”.

The Poverello Center truly has been a venture in unity. We simply could not operate without the support of dozens of non-profit partners and our entire community.

For the last 36 years the Poverello Center has been guided by this founding mission of providing food, shelter, and clothing. While our guiding principles and core services have not changed, the demand has grown beyond our current facilities capabilities.

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**The Need for a New Facility**

When the Poverello Center began providing emergency shelter services they purchased an old boarding house located at 535 Ryman Street.

In the past two decades this facility has undergone multiple additions and renovations. These renovations allowed us to utilize every last inch of space to serve the growing need . . . and now we are out of room.

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In our shelter's first full year of operation we provided only 4,792 nights of shelter. This typically ranged from 5 individuals per night in the summer months to upwards of 20 in the winter months.

In 2010 we provided 25,141 nights of shelter. We are now serving up to 70 individuals in the summer months and well over 90 throughout the winter.

On our coldest night in January of this year, 111 people sought refuge at the shelter. This places us well over our preferred capacity of 70 individuals and often over the set fire code of 100.

The need for hot meals has also surpassed the capabilities of our space. What began as brave endeavor in 1974 - serving 15,000 meals per year - is now a relied upon service for much of our community experiencing hunger. In 2010 we served over 126,000 meals, that's 347 meals per day.

The past couple of years have been particularly difficult as rates of homelessness continue to increase in a troubled economy. In the last three years alone we have experienced a 54 percent increase in shelter stays.

We've responded by carving out sleeping spaces in every corner of the facility. From October through December we convert our dining room and day room into nighttime dormitories.

When we run out of bed space and sleeping mats people are given blanket. Without our emergency shelter people who find themselves homeless would have no other option.

The overwhelming demand for food and shelter has put excessive strain on a building that is old, inefficient, and simply too small.

This converted boarding house operates with original plumbing and electrical systems throughout many areas, resulting in at least one bathroom being frequently out of order.

There are only nine toilets and three shower facilities that serve up to 100 individuals, this is well below modern code and creates significant problems among volunteers, clients, and employees alike.

We have worked hard to maintain the building as evidenced by the hundreds of volunteer hours provided by skilled tradesmen. But the building is old and is simply not designed to contain this many people.

Years of operating over capacity have resulted in debilitating maintenance costs. In 2010 we spent over 30,000.00 on maintenance and repairs. This is not a good use of our community's resources and is money that should instead go directly to helping people get back on their feet.

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## **Poverello Center Programs**

Most agree that the Poverello Center serves a very real and present need in this community. However, many are surprised to learn about all the services we provide.

For the past three decades we have continued to operate a large and heavily utilized soup kitchen which serves three meals every day. The soup kitchen not only provides hot meals to the shelter residents but also to people living in poverty in the downtown area.

On any given day, as many as 60 percent of the folks who come to the Poverello Center to eat a hot meal are not staying in our shelter.

These men and women are our neighbors, many of them living in homes nearby. They are striving for better lives. They just need a little help to make ends meet.

To better provide for the needs of these 60 percent, the Poverello Center opened a small but busy food pantry. Individuals and families can access the pantry several times per week and often use this to supplement food assistance from the Missoula Food Bank.

The majority of the food that stocks the pantry comes from our Food Rescue program, which we operate five days a week. This program picks up food from local restaurants and grocery stores that would otherwise end up in our landfills. In 2010 we rescued over 380,000 pounds of food at an estimated cost of over \$600,000.00.

The shelter, perhaps our most visible and well know service, has served this community for over two decades. It provides 30 days of overnight shelter to adults who find themselves homeless.

Within 48 hours of check in, all residents are expected to meet with an intake worker, talk about the circumstances that have lead to homelessness, set goals, and develop plans for both employment and housing.

They are given referrals to our partner agencies to address a variety of needs including housing, employment, and health issues. Residents are then expected to meet with a case manager on a weekly basis to discuss progress towards their goals.

If at the end of their 30 days in the program they have made no progress towards their goals, they are not allowed to remain at the shelter. If they are making marked progress towards housing and employment an extension may be granted.

The shelter environment is one of shared responsibility. Everyone staying there is expected to participate to the best of their ability. Examples of resident chores include dishwashing, serving meals, janitorial work, unloading the food trucks, and maintaining

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the outside of the building. If individuals are unwilling to share responsibility they are asked to leave.

Residents have access to transportation assistance through bus passes, medical care through the Health Care for the Homeless Clinic operated by Partnership Health Center and located in the shelter, and vocational assistance.

Veterans who reside at the Poverello Center receive additional support through our contract with the Veterans Administrative. Upon arrival at the shelter they can choose to enroll in the Homeless Veterans Program, which grants them access to a variety of services and support.

Two years ago, in an attempt to address the issue of chronic homelessness in Missoula, the Poverello Center established the Salcido Drop in Center.

This was an effort to extend our services to the roughly 11 percent of homeless people in Missoula who do not stay in our shelter. We are currently evaluating how this program fits within our core mission and whether it should be included in a new facility.

The Poverello Center has also increased our outreach efforts through Homeless Outreach Teams. This program works closely with the Business Improvement District's downtown police officer and ambassadors as well as community members and volunteers to address some of the specific needs of more chronically homeless people.

Instead of creating a central place where chronically homeless can access services, like a drop in center, we go to them. The goal of the program is to build relationships and work with other non-profits to provide opportunities for treatment and housing.

In addition to the services provided out of our downtown facility, the Poverello Center contracts with the Missoula Housing Authority to operate The Joseph Residence at Maclay Commons and the Valor House.

The Valor House and the Joseph Residence are very successful long term supportive housing programs designed to serve homeless families and veterans.

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### **People Who Access Services**

There are a lot of myths about who actually uses the services offered at the Poverello Center . . .

People who find themselves homeless are as varied as the services we provide. As a community we have uncovered surprising statistics about who finds themselves without a place to call their own.

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Out of the 111 people sleeping at the shelter on January 9, 2011 –  
45 reported some form of income  
24 were veterans; and  
40 were living with a disability

The people we serve include youth aging out of foster care, elderly people struggling to get by on retirement income, veterans unable to find jobs, and everyone in between.

At times, this will also include people struggling with addiction and mental illness. The Poverello Center has maintained various policies on extending services to individuals who are intoxicated.

Currently services are not extended to individuals who are heavily intoxicated or disrespectful, primarily because our entire facility is operated on the principles of safety and respect.

Several years ago we initiated our winter weather policy. Under this policy intoxicated men and women can access shelter services only when the temperature drops below 20 degrees. People are expected to remain safe and respectful, and if they fail to do this they are asked to leave.

It has always been our policy to immediately call the police when someone leaves the facility and we have concerns about their risk to themselves or others.

While it has at times been a strain on our employees, we are proud of the outcome of the winter weather policy. For several years now Missoula has not seen weather related deaths associated with homelessness.

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### **Addressing Concerns of Safety**

There have been a lot of questions about safety in a new facility, and we're eager to talk about that because we are proud of our safety record.

When someone stays at the shelter we immediately run a check of the Montana Correctional Offender Network. We do not place other clients or staff members in danger by serving sexual predators.

Communication with the police assists with safety and remains a priority for us. Starting earlier this year a lead staff member meets monthly with a representative from the Missoula Police Department and the Sheriffs Department to review the registry and discuss individuals residing at the shelter.

This communication increases the chances that anyone failing to register will be caught. It is a protective element for the entire community.

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The Poverello Center also works very hard to decrease incidents of conflict within the facility. You'll learn later tonight that criminal activity by those residing in the shelter remains low in comparison to the larger community.

However, when criminal behavior does occur it is not our practice to condone or enable it among clients accessing our services.

If we witness any dangerous or criminal behavior, either at the shelter or while doing outreach in the community, we immediately call the police and we encourage community members to do the same. Being compassionate does not mean ignoring behavior that puts others in danger.

Our employees are well trained and experienced in managing conflict. This greatly decreases incidents of violence and potential safety issues. Annual training includes Crisis De-Escalation, the Crisis in Training Program-which is facilitated by the Department of Corrections.

We are committed to providing our staff members the tools they need to keep themselves and other clients safe, and our record shows that we do this.

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### **Organizational Sustainability**

Questions have also arisen about the Poverello Center's ability to operate and sustain a new facility. Our board members and employees are committed to living within our means and we recognize that we cannot do it alone.

We rely on our relationships with dozens of non-profits and will continue to collaborate to ensure that no one organization bears the brunt of meeting the growing demand.

An efficient and well designed facility will also impact overall operating costs. It should decrease our utility costs and dramatically reduce the burden of maintenance and repair costs.

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### **In Closing**

I'd like to close by reminding everyone that the act of relocating the Poverello Center alone will not end homelessness. It's only by working together that we will adequately address homelessness in our community. Building a safe, secure, and adequate homeless shelter is the necessary first step.

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While we regret that this conversation did not happen earlier, we are grateful that it is happening now. We hope that you can share honestly and help us move forward to find a solution. I would also encourage those of you who have visited the Poverello Center to come by, we would love to give you a tour and talk to you more about what we do.

- [Send us your comments, schedule a tour or volunteer](#)

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