

# Neighborhood backlash derails North Asheville emergency shelter

Posted on November 8, 2023  
by Jessica Wakeman



*TAKE ME TO CHURCH: Grace Episcopal Church, pictured here, Trinity United Methodist Church in West Asheville and Grace Covenant Presbyterian in North Asheville are three churches that had offered temporary space in their buildings for a short-term shelter. Photo by Jessica Wakeman*

Misinformation, inadequate communication and unsubstantiated fears have scuttled plans to offer temporary shelter for homeless people at a North Asheville church.

Last year, congregants from Grace Episcopal Church on Merrimon Avenue traveled to West Asheville to volunteer for the [Safe Shelter program](#). This fall, Grace Episcopal was gearing up to offer its own space as a potential host site. Safe Shelter is a collaboration involving Grace



rotating locations in Asheville. In addition to space in the churches themselves, the program explores other potential sites such as vacant or underutilized buildings. Besides providing temporary lodging, the collaborative's long-term goal is to help clients move into permanent housing.

In September, however, the Rev. **Milly Morrow** decided not to offer Grace Episcopal as a potential site for the shelter. Citing intense backlash, Morrow confirmed that "We're not going to host it at Grace." The Rev. **Mike Reardon**, Grace Episcopal's associate rector, will still be part of the core leadership team, however, and congregants will be encouraged to volunteer.

The backlash began with a private Facebook group and quickly spilled over into phone calls, emails and a tense meeting between church representatives and group members in late September. The ensuing fallout grew increasingly heated, leading Morrow to conclude that "The reality is these folks will be safer outside of North Asheville." Instead, AHOPE Day Center in downtown Asheville will host Safe Shelter for the next six months.

Many of the neighborhood's concerns were based on inaccurate assumptions about both the program and the people it seeks to serve.

Longtime Grace Episcopal congregant **Katherine Kaderabek**, who was involved in last winter's effort, says she's proud to have been part of it. "I volunteered on a weekly basis and got to know the residents very well, shared meals with them and played UNO with them. They're beautiful people. They're vulnerable. ... They're not bad people at all."

It's impossible to know the extent to which more direct communication by various parties might have avoided at least some of the misunderstandings. But in a larger sense, this saga also illustrates how social media's broad and instantaneous reach can facilitate the spread of misinformation — and, in the process, perhaps undermine efforts to address pressing needs.

## The backstory

The idea behind Safe Shelter borrows from [Room in the Inn](#), a longtime local program that provides temporary shelter for women at rotating locations in participating houses of worship, as well as case management services. The Safe Shelter collaborative coalesced out of groups involved in the [Code Purple initiative](#), which provides emergency beds during extremely cold weather. The Safe Shelter partners came together to address gaps in the currently available services for homeless people.

One of those partners, Counterflow LLC, was established by Asheville residents **Anna and Dan Pizzo** in April 2022, based partly on their prior experience working with other local organizations.

The following month, the Dogwood Health Trust, as part of an agreement with the City of Asheville and the Buncombe County commissioners, provided funds to hire the National Alliance



Winter Safe Shelter, as the collaborative was originally known, was established that fall and funded by various entities including the City of Asheville. The seasonal initiative, which had a few paid staffers in addition to church volunteers, ran from last December through March of this year.


Meanwhile, at a Jan. 25, 2023, joint session of City Council and the county commissioners, the consultants presented their findings, which included the need for more shelter beds. The recommendations aim to [reduce “unsheltered homelessness” by 50%](#) in two years. An interim report released by Winter Safe Shelter the following month stated that as of that point, 71% of exiting guests, including 100% of families, had transitioned to permanent housing. Although the number of beds was small, the guests stayed an average of just 16 days. Over the next year, the group projects that it will serve 170 people, according to the interim report.

Accordingly, on Sept. 15, Asheville and Buncombe County each [allocated](#) \$875,000 in federal American Rescue Plan Act money – \$1.75 million all told – to fund additional short-term beds for one year at both The Salvation Army and the Haywood Street Congregation as well as Safe Shelter. That funding will enable Safe Shelter to transform last winter’s seasonal program into a fully staffed year-round operation.

The funding agreement between the city and Safe Shelter calls for 10 beds for families and 10 for individuals at rotating locations. When the shelter opened Nov. 6, two families filled nine out of the beds reserved for families. Several beds for individuals were filled by people “identified with more urgent needs,” Pizzo tells *Xpress*.

## Neighborhood watch

North Asheville resident **Tara Maria Hackett** belonged to a private Facebook group called The North Report that has since been shut down. On Sept. 25, she posted a photo of a man sleeping on the sidewalk in front of Grace Episcopal, wrapped in a blanket with a pair of shoes beside him. The caption underneath it took issue with the idea that the church would receive thousands of dollars to provide beds for homeless people while neighborhood residents would be tripping over folks sprawled on the sidewalk. Hackett’s post included Grace Episcopal’s email address; she also called and emailed the church herself. Asked later what her thoughts were when she saw the sleeping man, Hackett told *Xpress*, “You’re gonna bring beds up here and homeless people and you’re getting public funding, you should be taking care of them. ... I just showed concern, and that’s really all there is.”

Meanwhile, in a lengthy post on the thread, North Report administrator **Honor Moor** wrote: “Why are we moving resources into North Asheville when we have tried-and-true resources at WNC Rescue Mission, ABCCM who know how to handle the chronically helpless addicted? Why would we move this destitute population near two schools and a new small children’s park with million-dollar houses?” Later in the same post, she wrote: “Next, the traveling needle vans. We are going to see all of what EAST and WEST is getting.” 

When asked what had prompted her comments about syringes, Moor responded: “I have no information. The North Report administrators do not believe that needles should be dispensed in residential neighborhoods all over Asheville.” She declined to disclose the names of the other administrators.

## Tense exchanges

In the wake of Hackett’s North Report post, Rev. Morrow says she received emails from 12 people, as well as phone calls. And while a couple of the emails supported the church’s participation in Safe Shelter, most did not. She says she told those folks that the man in the photo is a church member and a safe person, adding, “I suggest you go down and just meet him.”

A subsequent email exchange between Morrow and Hackett over several days cuts to the heart of the dispute. Morrow shared those emails with *Xpress*.

Hackett claims the church never responded to her calls, but in fact, Morrow emailed her within hours, writing, “Feel free to call me regarding your concerns about the man who is on our property” and providing her phone number. When she didn’t hear back, however, Morrow wrote again two days later, saying “It is inappropriate and causes division to spread misinformation out of fear, based on lack of complete information.”

In response, Hackett wrote, “You keep those on church property following the letter of the law and keep the public sidewalks clear in front of that property, or I can assure you, you’ve not begun to see concern.” To which Morrow replied, “Are you threatening me?”

That same day, Hackett wrote back, “I’m promising you that I will continue to inform and rally my neighbors, neighborhood businesses and my community to keep it safe from illegal and suspicious activities.”

Morrow then said she needed more information about the “illegal activity that you fear we are aiding. ... I am afraid I cannot be of any help if I don’t know exactly what you are asking me to manage and control.”

Hackett responded, “I am going to need you to stop harassing me with these passive-aggressive, bothersome emails with questions about help that I did not request. ... Do not reply again.”

And to that, Morrow tells *Xpress*, “I didn’t say anything.”

## A hard meeting

The miscommunication continued face to face on Sept. 28, when Morrow met with Moor, another North Report group member whom Moor declined to identify, and **Ben Scales**, a longtime congregant and former senior warden at the church.

“It was really a hard meeting — just really, really hard,” Morrow said later, and her and Moor’s deeply conflicting accounts bear that out.



an attorney who's a congregant would violate church policy.

Moor also reports that "We asked what population they wanted to serve and they said all populations, including the drug addicted and chronically homeless."

"That is absolutely not true," Morrow tells *Xpress*. According to the terms of the ARPA funding agreement, she explains, "The specific community that Safe Shelter works with are the most marginalized communities: LGBTQ, BIPOC, families."

Moor also claims she was told that the church allows overnight camping on its property.

"That is a lie," counters Morrow. "We had a church member [the man in the photo] sleeping on the property; he was also cleaning up every day. He came to church on Tuesdays and Sundays. ... He occasionally slept in the back because he felt safe there. I did not call the police on him because he was not violent or disruptive: He was helpful." And though she says church leadership has called the police to remove individuals "a couple of times" based on unsafe behavior, they "take a lot of time to get to know folks before we tell them to move on."

During the meeting, Moor says she was also told that the church was "going to be serving meals soon."







*SANCTUARY: Grace Episcopal Church rector Milly Morrow says there's nothing unusual about homeless people sleeping on church properties. She says 24-hour surveillance would be the only way to prevent it, and that's not something she'd be open to doing "considering my position as a Christian." Photo by Jessica Wakeman*



Reardon, Grace Episcopal's associate rector, said later that when people hear about a potential shelter, "They imagine we are dealing with the most severe cases of mental illness. And those people deserve shelter too. But the services they require are not what we're capable of providing."

## The underserved

Safe Shelter isn't the only local program serving the area's homeless population. But the collaborative is designed to reach people who may fall through the cracks. Because there are separate shelters for men and women, for example, couples can't stay together. And since boys older than 13 aren't allowed in the shelters serving women and children, they're sent to the men's shelter on their own.

According to Counterflow's website, this year's rotating facility will be fully staffed, including "a dedicated community health worker to support guests with permanent housing and other needs."

The collaborative obtained a lease to operate the temporary shelter at AHOPE and acquired a temporary use permit from the City of Asheville, says Pizzo. Grace Episcopal's decision not to offer shelter space, she says, was one factor in the program's current plans.

As for drug use, notes Anna Pizzo, "Safe Shelter will not distribute needles to guests, and we will not permit any illicit substance or alcohol at Safe Shelter locations." That is partly because there will be children in the shelter and partly to ensure the safety of the staff and other guests, she explains. Both The Steady Collective, a local nonprofit, and Buncombe County Health and Human Services operate needle exchange programs, but Morrow says Grace Episcopal has no plans to partner with either of them.

Neighbors concerned about needles and drugs might be surprised by the program's actual clientele, Pizzo points out. "The majority of the previous Safe Shelter guests would not be recognizable as homeless if you were to come across them in daily lives." Last year's guests, she says, included someone who moved to Asheville for employment but whose intended living situation fell through and they couldn't afford to keep staying in hotels. Another person had a young child and had left a domestic violence situation. In yet another case a family with children moved to Asheville because of the father's job but had been living in their minivan. There were also several elderly women who'd been living in their cars.

## Moving parts

The Grace Episcopal dispute underscores the challenges involved in balancing the need for transparency and community outreach with the complex logistics of finding sites for such facilities and jumping through the requisite hoops to get them up and running.

Some of the neighbors felt that information was being withheld. "There was no community outreach" about the shelter, Hackett told *Xpress*. Moor, meanwhile, said she didn't learn much





may not pan out. “We’re not going to keep every neighborhood abreast of all the things we explore that don’t necessarily materialize,” Pizzo explains. “As soon as things are confirmed, we make an effort to share that with the community.”

For her part, Morrow describes the situation as “a conversation, moving parts, puzzle pieces.”

There are also significant financial considerations. Under the terms of the American Rescue Plan Act, the program has to have a fiscal agent that commits to paying employees and contractors, says **Emily Ball**, homeless strategy division manager for the City of Asheville. And while Trinity United Methodist is taking on that role this year, all three partner churches, notes Morrow, had to figure out “how we are going to do that in a way that we have mutual responsibility ... so that one church doesn’t end up holding the fiscal responsibility and be unable to do that.”

As for the concerns about the use of public money, Reardon rejects the idea that Safe Shelter and other “people in homeless services are getting wealthy off of the services they provide and that they, in fact, don’t want to see the problem ameliorated or even solved ... because it deepens their pockets.” And to folks who don’t understand how grant money or federal funding works, he says flatly, “I don’t receive a cent from this project.”

Once Safe Shelter’s plans are finalized, the church leaders will use sermons and letters to the congregation to encourage congregants to volunteer. But from the program’s point of view, says Pizzo, it’s premature and counterproductive to disseminate limited and possibly inaccurate information while the plans are still so fluid.


## Face to face

At first glance, the dispute between Grace Episcopal and the Facebook group members seems a clear-cut case of how social media can effect change: A concerned resident encouraged like-minded people to contact the church, they did, and the church declined to serve as a host site.

Viewed through a different lens, however, the incident highlights the potential for harm that can result from jumping to conclusions — and then broadcasting them via social media.

In the first place, there were no beds for the homeless at the church. And at that stage, notes Morrow, “We weren’t even sure if [the temporary shelter] would be hosted at Grace.” In any case, this year’s Safe Shelter program hadn’t even started yet.

In an Oct. 9 email to *Xpress*, Moor explained that her Facebook comments were “written before we had any knowledge of which population would be served. ... After speaking to a parishioner privately, I personally think it’s a fantastic program.”

Meanwhile, Morrow says there’s nothing unusual about homeless people sleeping on church grounds. “It happens in every church,” she maintains, and the only way to prevent it would be to conduct 24-hour surveillance. But that’s not something she’d be open to doing, “considering my position as a Christian.” 



church chose to do that. Because they weren't afraid."

- LIKE
- 11.1 K VIEWS
- COMMUNITY NEWS
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#### About Jessica Wakeman

Jessica Wakeman is an Asheville-based reporter for Mountain Xpress. She has been published in Rolling Stone, Glamour, New York magazine's The Cut, Bustle and many other publications. She was raised in Connecticut and holds a Bachelor's degree in journalism

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## 20 thoughts on “Neighborhood backlash derails North Asheville emergency shelter”



Zodwa

5 months ago

Hey Jessica, Did Milli or Scales suggest you write this hit piece, because it sure reads like it.

👍 2    🗨️ 2

REPLY



Andrew Dahm

5 months ago

Seems pretty clear that efforts to keep truly awful people out of North Asheville have failed.

👍 1    🗨️ 1

REPLY



Tamatha Winstead

5 months ago

So if you are Homeless or have mental issues You are a awful Person?I see now Why Jesus walked with the people he did.Prayers are needed for The Entire Human Race.

👍 1    🗨️ 1

REPLY



Prop Joe

5 months ago

REPLY



andrew dahm

5 months ago

You've got the wrong end of the stick here, friend.



REPLY



Richard Phelps

5 months ago

In most of the US, through zoning regulations and NIMBY activism we concentrate social problems in small areas making the problems worse than they need to be, while burdening and penalizing the most open-minded and empathetic. The social safety net in our country is thin.



REPLY



Brian Sarzynski

5 months ago

Thank you, Jessica Wakeman and Xpress, for writing and publishing this important story. This is top-notch journalism and an excellent example of Xpress's mission to serve our community through thoughtful, factual, well-written local stories. Keep up the good work!



REPLY



Taxpayer

5 months ago

This does read like a hit piece. If that's the goal of Mountain Xpress now, good job.





REPLY



Nunya

5 months ago

Typical precious North Asheville exclusive NIMBYism. Cram all the “do gooder” crap on downtown, and East & West AVL. Just too precious to let those homeless people walk their streets. They probably were wringing their hands in disbelief at East AVL over the Ramada Inn conversion debacle.

 1  1

REPLY



WagonWheel

5 months ago

Or, maybe they have simply been paying attention. Try it.

REPLY



M. Dahm

5 months ago

Grace Episcopal safely hosted Room at the for years in North Asheville. It was very low key. I remember quite a few guests working steady jobs. These are real people who want to live normal lives, not “the chronically helpless addicted.” And, on the heel of that statement, “I personally think it’s a fantastic program,” is hard to reconcile.

Demonizing people in order to keep them off of public streets in your neighborhood is not the answer. Political decisions since the 1970s have led to a lack of state-supported mental health care in our communities. People are no worse or better than they’ve ever been. The support is gone.

I worked at the public library for a long time and we were never more grateful, there, than when we had the opportunity to treat someone under duress just like you’d treat anyone.

The rewards of seeing that unexpected pleasure/relief/hope in someone’s eyes ... were very real. Helping, as you can, is good for both parties.

I shudder to think we’re seeing an inverse relationship between the value of a home and the



3

REPLY



Brian Hook  
5 months ago

It's fascinating to see comments that regard this as a "hit piece." Normally that would mean that it's highly biased or unfair, but it does not read that way at all: clearly all parties have been consulted and had an opportunity to respond to the reporting. It's not a "hit piece" if it reveals the ugliness that's there...unless you mean that it "hit" you uncomfortably in your values or actions.

2

REPLY



North Asheville  
5 months ago

Thank you to Tara Maria Hackett and Honor Moor for helping to keep our neighborhood safe. I was stalked by a homeless man, who kept stepping on my heels as he followed me. Another homeless men seen sprawled on sidewalk in front of Geraldine's Bakery Asheville Compounding Pharmacy having to keep its street side door locked because of homeless men sleeping there and injecting drugs.

2

REPLY



JT4784  
5 months ago

Surely you took the time to understand the program so you know that the people who would be served at this church are not the ones you describe. Right?

1





NFB

5 months ago

I wonder how many of the people upset by the church carrying out mission of Jesus are the first to whine about threats to “religious liberty” every time LGBTQ people ask for the civil rights.

👍 1 👎

REPLY



Jason Williams

5 months ago

The lack of empathy for people who are struggling to survive in this world is staggering. Yes, addiction and mental health issues plague the unhoused community, but that doesn't negate their humanity. The unhoused need help, and to vilify a religious organization that is adhering to one of the pillars of its doctrine, helping those in need, is a step shy of villainous itself. The whole Grace Station community should be ashamed of the way it has painted Grace Episcopal and Safe Shelters' mission to give a little humanity back to a marginalized people. It's just basic human decency.

👍 1 👎

REPLY



Pierce

5 months ago

I love the fact the these arm chair liberal commentators act like we don't have unhoused and addicted in North Asheville. We do. The difference is we want to keep our streets clean and communities safe and not expand after seeing how rest of town has and city council has let this town become. Im proud of community members fighting back to show at least some part of this town has a backbone to stand up for the community. Before you comment please considered fostering a child so they do not have to sleep in dss building. Arm Chair Liberals.

👍 👎 1

REPLY





I have little respect for religious people, but have to applaud the good ones at this church who actually want to walk the talk and help the least among us. You know, like their Jesus demanded. The congregants and neighbors who fight well-designed and controlled programs like this one, serving the invisible who aren't terrorizing anyone, should be utterly ashamed of their selfishness borne of nothing but irrational fear. That fear, behind so much suffering in our world, is poison to us all.



REPLY



RMC

5 months ago

Programs that can actually get people off the street. People who need a little help and want to help themselves. Churches trying to engage in community service. Derailed. The statement about million dollar homes and the woman who said "You keep those... ..I'm promising you..." do not represent everyone who lives in North Asheville.



REPLY



Gordon Smith

5 months ago

Making homeless people invisible is hard-hearted, short-sighted, and the height of privilege. When you see someone suffering on the streets, here's hoping your first thoughts are of love and care rather than "Get Off My Lawn".

Thanks Milly Morrow and everyone who's working every day to fight for the powerless to make a more just society.



REPLY



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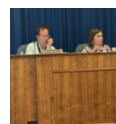
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