

LOCAL

## New year-round homeless shelter will open in downtown Asheville; 20 beds bound for AHOPE



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ASHEVILLE - A new year-round homeless shelter is opening Nov. 6 in downtown Asheville. Dubbed Safe Shelter, a partnership between three area churches and Counterflow LLC, the group has signed a six-month lease with Homeward Bound for use of the AHOPE Day Center, where they will operate 20 shelter beds nightly.

The work will not interfere with the ongoing daytime programming at the center, and will utilize office space and other rooms to house 10 beds for families and 10 for single individuals, specifically targeting demographics that struggle to find shelter elsewhere.

The morning before Safe Shelter's first night of service, Shelter Director Christian Chambers was feeling optimistic. Beds were in place, referrals were ready and 12 months of funding was secured from Buncombe County and the city of Asheville. The allocation, totaling \$485,500 between both municipalities, was part of \$1.75 million in COVID relief funds directed toward securing immediate shelter beds.

Families would have somewhere to sleep that night who otherwise would have nowhere else to go, Chambers said, including parents with young kids, with teenagers — populations for whom shelter pickings are slim, particularly without splitting up, which Chambers said “a lot of people would rather freeze than do.”

“We saw this gap that was missing,” he said. “At Safe Shelter, we want to do things differently.”

The shelter is referral only, and Counterflow founder and owner Anna Pizzo said submissions are still being taken. A form and more information can be found at [counterflowasheville.com/safeshelter](https://counterflowasheville.com/safeshelter).

“It should really be a net positive,” Pizzo said of the shelter sharing space with the day center. The programs won't overlap as AHOPE closes daily in the afternoons, and while they will share the building, there will be different staff, guidelines and, for the most part, different populations.

"We see Safe Shelter being there as a way to increase safety for everyone in that vicinity," Pizzo said. "For other property owners, for the unhoused themselves, for the physical property." It now means there is going to be trained staff at the center nearly around the clock.

Chambers, 30, who worked at Homeward Bound for six years before assuming the role of Safe Shelter director, called it a "symbiotic relationship."

By maximizing the space, “AHOPE is becoming everything that it can be.”

## **Where did Safe Shelter begin?**

Two years ago, over Thanksgiving 2021, as temperatures dipped and Asheville's typical emergency shelter options floundered, a group of volunteers launched several nights of temporary shelter at a local church. Chambers, who worked for Homeward Bound at the time, fielded a phone call from volunteers asking after needed gear, and leapt into action.

"I think I moved like 40 beds out of a storage unit and dropped them off there," Chambers said. That response has since evolved, first into winter shelter in the Fellowship Hall of Trinity United Methodist Church, and then, in 2022, into a three-church partnership providing beds in the basement of another West Asheville church.

Now, the effort has become a year-round 20-bed shelter, which Melanie Robertson, who has worked with Trinity since the start, now co-chair of the Asheville-Buncombe Homeless Coalition, said is a "continuation of the faith community providing emergency shelter."

“It really came full circle,” Chambers said. from getting a shelter up and running in 48 hours, to a full fledged, nightly effort.

Robertson said Nov. 6 that she was out moving mattresses to the space with Chambers and Pizzo the night before, evoking memories of the call made to Chambers two years earlier.

"The community, the folks involved, still have a primary goal of bringing hope to support to our unhoused guests," Robertson said. "It's growing every year and I'm moved that despite

some of the negative narrative that is in town that seems so opposed to anything going on for our unhoused people, that this a testament to 'no, there is still a lot of folks that want to help and be involved.'"

## **Quick facts about Safe Shelter:**

Safe Shelter is a collaboration among Trinity United Methodist, Grace Episcopal Church, Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church and Counterflow Asheville. Targeting underserved communities, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, people of color and families with children, the shelter space was initially intended to rotate monthly between churches.

\$485,500 in funding for 12 months of capital and operations.

20 beds: 10 for families, 10 for single individuals.

Fully-staffed during open hours, 6 pm.-7 a.m.

Eight overnight staff members, plus three core staff, including Chambers, an operations manager and a community health worker.

Will be open nightly and year-round beginning Nov. 6 at AHOPE Day Center, 19 N Anne Street.

## **What now?**

With funding secured for the first year, Pizzo said Safe Shelter will begin seeking funding for the long-term, and continue the search for a permanent location.

Traci Ettison, Safe Shelter's Community Health Worker, will be onsite to act as a case worker for people staying at the shelter, with a goal of helping residents exit into permanent housing.

During Winter Safe Shelter 2022-23 season, according to a final report, of the 32 people served, 66% exited to permanent or transitional housing, and 100% of the exiting families are now permanently housed.

People looking to volunteer, donate a meal or offer other support can learn more at [counterflowasheville.com/safeshelter](https://counterflowasheville.com/safeshelter).

**More:** Buncombe commissioners OK expansion of low-barrier shelter beds. How many are coming?

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