

Winter 2022

Community In Action

A newsletter for friends of the Opportunity Council



From Uncertainty to Stability:

How one vet found his way home

The move wasn't going to plan, Mike explained to Island County Veteran's Assistance Specialist Ross Labrenz.

When he first relocated to Whidbey Island to be closer to his daughter, Martha, Mike was sure he had the next stage of his life mapped out. First item on his list: find a place close to his daughter's young family. Mike's savings wasn't huge, but should have been enough for moving expenses plus first and last on an apartment for himself.

A former Army man, Mike had faith that even on his fixed income, he'd be able to hang tough and make it work. Unfortunately, with average rents 40% higher than the state fair market average, low vacancy rates, and a shortage of one bedroom apartments, the Oak Harbor housing market had other ideas for Mike and too many local vets. Hotels and application fees soon ate through Mike's savings and he found himself in a position he'd never imagined: facing homelessness.

A scrappy Chicago native, Mike prides himself on his self-sufficiency, even into his eighth decade. He worried about adding to Martha's plate—as a full time nursing student at Skagit Community College with a young family, Mike was sure she had enough to worry about. Determined to find a way to live independently,

Mike reached out to the Island County Opportunity Council office for help.

With services ranging from energy assistance to emergency housing for women and children, the Island County Resource Center's Supportive Services for Veterans works closely with the VA to make sure local veterans have a place to call home. Using a two-pronged strategy of Rapid Rehousing and Homelessness Prevention, the program serves both vets currently experiencing homelessness and those at risk of becoming homeless due to factors like increasing rents or other unforeseen expenses. In either case, says Labrenz, the first step is to help those seeking help find the place to start.

"Everything is spinning when a person has become homeless or is just about to," explains Labrenz. "The first step is helping people prioritize and make a game plan—a lot of times just starting from the easiest steps helps a person find their footing."

With Ross's help, Mike was able to qualify for the Veterans Administration Supportive Housing (VASH) Program—a voucher system that covers 70% of a veteran's housing cost and a vital option for vets like Mike who, at age 79, lives on a fixed income.

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MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Thanks to you....

"We feel safe, we have a roof over our heads, we have dignity"

By Greg Winter, Executive Director



Opportunity Council helps people improve their lives. It's a great business to be in. Every day, our talented and caring staff walk alongside our clients to help them achieve the goals they have for themselves and their families.

Your strong support of Opportunity Council means that we can reach more people who are working hard for a hopeful future; such as this family of four

who recently immigrated to the United States, settling in Whatcom County:

"...we were not looking for a better life, rather we simply wanted to live in a place where we would feel safe. Upon arriving in the USA, we were not ready for the difficulties we encountered here. So, we want to say that we are very grateful to your entire team for your help!!! You called us, you helped us personally with many necessary matters. We are very, very grateful to you. We now have a work permit! We can work! I truly hope that your compassion and kindness will be able to help many more people in the future to find refuge in this country and feel safe."

Your generous gifts also help us serve more families who are currently experiencing a crisis; like this father whose livelihood was devastated by the pandemic and is struggling to prevent him and his children from becoming homeless:

"Thanks to you and the wonderful workers at opportunity council my family has a roof over our head, and we are infinitely grateful for that. In times where a government-mandated shutdown completely stops all income, and help seems so far away, your organization took on the daunting task of distributing the funds so desperately needed to keep livelihoods intact with grace under pressure."

I am a 36-year-old full-time student father of two who, without any outside contribution, fully supported my family and my academic endeavors. With the shutdown I lost all income. This was a character-building year and a half, where hard times were met with determination, grit, and a smile. If it were not for the help from the Opportunity Council, my family and I would be homeless at this very moment. The Opportunity Council has helped so many families in Whatcom County and thanks to you and your organization we have dignity and spirit to continue in the reverberation of love and light."

Stories like these are only possible with the generous support from our communities. These are just two of examples of the impact generous individuals, businesses, and local foundations have on countless individuals and families we work together to serve. Support like yours truly matters. Thank you!



Opportunity Council Whatcom Homeless Service Center director Teri Bryant and Executive Director Greg Winter recently toured Gardenview Village in Bellingham. The village is a new 30-bed tiny home community that primarily serves people experiencing homelessness who are 55+ and/or medically fragile. It has a shared kitchen, a community room, and hygiene facilities with restrooms, showers, and laundry. The village has 24/7 staff plus on-site case management that helps residents obtain employment, healthcare and other services, and get on a path to permanent housing. The OC Homeless Outreach Team refers people to the Gardenview Village, which is a housing partnership between Road2Home, the City of Bellingham, and the Low Income Housing Institute (LIHI).

NEWS

Celebrating community support for a new home and fresh starts

It started with “can you help?” That was the question then-local Judge Raquel Montoya-Lewis asked Opportunity Council Executive Director Greg Winter. Montoya-Lewis served as Whatcom County’s Drug Court Judge, and Greg was serving on the County’s Incarceration Prevention and Reduction Taskforce. The group had recently identified a particularly urgent need: safe and stable housing with evidence-based care for people struggling with opioid and other substance use disorders.

That question from four years ago inspired the next new housing development project for Opportunity Council: the recently opened Recovery House. The result of a successful partnership between Opportunity Council, the Whatcom County Health Department, the City of Bellingham and Lifeline Connections, the facility will pair people seeking treatment with the care they deserve in a safe, secure and welcoming home.

To ensure the project was a success, Opportunity Council staff collaborated with other community partners to leverage existing skills, expertise and resources: Opportunity Council Housing Development staff focused on developing the property donated by PeaceHealth while Lifeline Connections—experts in behavioral health and providers of evidence-based treatment—focused on developing services to help residents recover and thrive.

Fueled by these partnerships, the individual support of community members, and other public and private funders, the project was recently completed and will soon open its doors—ready and able to serve 16 men at a time.



Left to Right: Seth Fleetwood, City of Bellingham Mayor; Jackie Mitchell Behavioral Health Program Specialist, Whatcom County Health Department; Jared Sanford, CEO Lifeline Connections; Greg Winter, Executive Director Opportunity Council at the October 21, 2021 ribbon cutting ceremony for Recovery House.

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Partner Highlight: Providing a safe place to build basic skills

The OC Employment Services program helps people get back into the workforce by partnering with a wide range of businesses and organizations. The program brings individuals seeking employment together with employers seeking workers and invested in a strong local economy.

One of the partner organizations, the Salvation Army Bellingham Corp, considers itself a family first and prides itself on creating an accessible and welcoming workplace. “We’re here to help people no matter what they need,” said Elizabeth Hicks, Social Services coordinator.

When Employment Services collaborates with fellow nonprofits like the Salvation Army it brings the added bonus of furthering both missions by setting up people for future success.

Opportunity Council job seekers placed with Salvation Army are often dipping their toes back in after extended periods of unemployment. People work in Corps programs like the food bank while also learning important office skills like managing phones and navigating a shared printer. “We’re a safe place to build those basic skills,” says Hicks, “because we’re here to catch you if you don’t have the answers yet.”



The ultimate win-win: Employment Services job seekers placed with Salvation Army gain valuable skills and work experience while helping distribute food through the Food Pantry program.

The most important thing she wants her employees to know is how much she wants them to succeed. “I’m always super excited when a member of my team has an interview for another job,” says Hicks. By partnering with Opportunity Council, the two programs “become a stepping stone on the path to the life each person deserves.”



To learn more about how to partner with Employment Services—either as a job seeker or employer looking to hire—call 360-734-5121 x1223 or visit oppco.org

Elected Leaders Ride Along with HOT

Whatcom County elected officials recently rode along with the Whatcom County Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) in October to get a glimpse into the challenges faced by local individuals experiencing homelessness and the part HOT plays in the journey to find every person a place to call home.



Pictured: State Representative for the 42nd District, Sharon Shewmake and Bellingham City Council Member, Hollie Huthman.



Finding Meaning by Giving to Others

Volunteer Spotlight: Scott Opsahl

Whatcom County Volunteer Scott Opsahl recently recently took the time to answer our volunteer questionnaire.

When did you decide to start volunteering and what attracted you to this cause or program?

I started volunteering for the SHIBA program in the fall of October 2017. I was newly retired and was looking for something constructive to do with my extra time. I was already familiar with the SHIBA program because when I turned 65 I took advantage of the free class on Medicare entitled, Welcome to Medicare, and the option of having an appointment with a SHIBA advisor to deal with my specific questions and to narrow the options available to me.

What do you do in your role?

I volunteer two mornings a week advising people on how the Medicare system works and then help them find adequate and affordable health insurance coverage. SHIBA is an outreach program of the Office of the Insurance Commissioner in Olympia so our services are free, unbiased, and confidential. I now teach the two-hour Welcome to Medicare class that is offered twice a quarter through the Whatcom Community College Community Education Program.

Why do you choose to volunteer and what motivates you to stay involved?

Strong communities are created when we look out for one another. No one got to where they are in life without the help of others, whether they acknowledge it or not. In retirement I have the time to give back to our community. I continue to volunteer because I have witnessed how great the need is. Medicare is complicated. Since 10,000 people turn 65 every day and become Medicare eligible we have our work cut out for us!

What are you most proud of as a volunteer?

My most satisfying experiences are when I am able to help save people money and relieve some of the stress they feel around health insurance. Sometimes people chose the wrong health plan and are paying more than they need to. Other people may find that they qualify for government assistance that will help them afford their health care.

"Worries about health insurance are a real burden for many, many people.. When I'm able to lift some of that burden, it ahs been a good day volunteering."

What do you hope SHIBA will achieve in the near future? In the long term?

A lot of people still do not know about the SHIBA program. We're trying to get the word out as best we can. Our local number is (360) 788-2725.

What do you wish other people knew about volunteering?

When you help someone in need you both benefit. In giving to others we find more meaning in life for ourselves. Volunteering can expand our worlds and enrich them.

What is SHIBA?

SHIBA (pronounced shEEba) stands for Statewide Health Insurance Benefits Advisors. Providing free, confidential, and impartial assistance, advisors help individuals navigate Medicare and their health care choices. With offices throughout the state, SHIBA is hosted in Whatcom County by Opportunity Council and sponsored by the Washington State Office of the Insurance Commissioner.

Volunteer SHIBA advisors like Scott are highly trained and experienced to counsel Medicare-eligible residents of all ages and backgrounds. They help people understand options and offer up-to-date information to make informed decisions concerning health insurance needs.

To learn more, contact the OC SHIBA program at (360) 788-2725 or visit oppco.org/shiba

Foundations for the Future: New Senior Housing and Affordable Childcare Project

Affordable Housing and Childcare are two fundamental resources our community consistently tells us are in short supply, as evidenced once again in this year's Prosperity Project (Opportunity Council's Community Needs Assessment).

We strive to meet this need in a variety of ways from developing housing projects with partners like Lifeline Connections and NW Youth Services, to partnering with the Bellingham Chamber of Commerce to found the Northwest Center for Childcare Retention & Expansion to support childcare providers and combat our region's childcare desert.

While still in the early stages, our latest project seeks to address both housing and childcare by creating a facility that combines the two.

The as-yet-unnamed project will be located on Forest St in downtown Bellingham and will house a 5,000 square foot childcare facility and 56 1-bedroom affordable apartments for people over 55 to help meet a community need. This year's Prosperity Project shows the number of people over the age of 55 experiencing homelessness continue to grow.



In addition to addressing housing and child care needs, the facility will also offer a shared multipurpose room for intergenerational activities between the children and residents—activities with clear benefits for the health and well-being of all-ages.

Residents will have a space to call home in downtown Bellingham that has a walkability score of 93 out of 100, is located near a grocery store as well as the Bellingham Senior Center. The facility will be all-electric and eventually equipped with solar panels—reducing carbon emissions while providing a safe, affordable place for friends and neighbors to safely learn, grow, and thrive.

Garden Harvest

Maple Alley Inn's organic garden provided fresh greens and other vegetables for Maple Alley Inn's meal delivery program to individuals quarantining alone with COVID, as well as to other Opportunity Council programs like Dorothy Place, and to partner organizations at Meals on Wheels and the Bellingham Food Bank. Pictured here: Jess Meyer, Maple Alley Inn Assistant, as she works on pound 780 of the more than 800 pounds of fresh tomatoes harvested from the garden this year.

**Note: indoor masking was not required at the time this photograph was taken. To preserve the health and safety of our community and team, Opportunity Council remains committed to following all CDC pandemic guidelines.*



From Uncertainty to Stability

Cont'd from pg. 1

Voucher in hand, Mike and Ross were able to find him an apartment that kept Mike close to Martha but still independent. Knowing that home is more than just walls and a roof, Ross also helped Mike connect with Habitat for Humanity and the Whidbey Community Foundation to pick furniture, linens, and other housewares.

Settled into his new home, Mike confessed to Ross that he thought his next chapter would be the best in his life so far.

The most pressing item on his to-do list today?

Playing the role of grandpa.

Since 1965 Community Action through the Opportunity Council has been a vital part of life in the Pacific Northwest.

As your Community Action Agency for the past 56 years, Opportunity Council has been dedicated to helping people, changing lives, and building community.

From developing new housing and fighting climate change through home improvement and weatherization to supporting individuals and families through every stage of life, your contribution will ensure real people get the real help they deserve. Give today and help build a brighter future for us all.



Give today for a better tomorrow

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Enclosed is my tax-deductible gift for: ☐ \$30 ☐ \$50 ☐ \$100 ☐ \$200 ☐ \$500 ☐ Other _____

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For questions, or to give by phone, call (360) 734-5121 x 1332.

Friends of the Opportunity Council are appreciated and may be publicly recognized.

☐ Please check this box if you do not wish your name to be published.



Donate online at oppco.org

Opportunity Council programs include: Community Resource Center • Homeless Housing • Dorothy Place • Marjie's House • Homeless Prevention • Rental Assistance • Child Care Aware • Nutrition • Basic Food Education & Outreach • Maple Alley Inn • Energy Assistance • Weatherization Home Repair Loan Program • Early Support for Infants and Toddlers • Emergency Child Care Vouchers • Early Achievers • School Backpack Drives • Head Start • Early Head Start • Early Childhood Education Assistance Program • Building Performance Center • The Energy Project • Conservation Education • Community Energy Challenge • Housing Development • 22 North • Financial Literacy and Renter Education (F.L.A.R.E.) • Whatcom Asset Building Coalition • Employment Case Management • Project X-it • Veteran Services



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Giving children the start they deserve

"My oldest started kindergarten this year and in my first ever parent-teacher conference, his teacher told me that my son starts every day so excited to learn. I know that was because of the experience and support our whole family had at his [Head Start] classroom."

After a year of virtual learning, preschoolers started the school year this year at Opportunity Council locations throughout Whatcom County. October was Head Start Awareness Month. Visit oppco.org for more information on how this nationwide program changes lives and strengthens our community.



The Gift of Community

Donations large and small add up to make a big difference in our community. Local individuals that participated in community giving programs like Amazon Smile, Fred Meyer's Community Rewards, and Target's Giving Circle helped raise more than \$4,500 to help their friends and neighbors in 2021.

For more information on these
programs and for other ways you can
help, visit oppco.org/howtohelp



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