

NEWS

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People experiencing homelessness often lack transportation to get to the agencies where they may obtain the necessary resources and documentation to help them get jobs, housing and social services.

This transportation void is now being filled by M.O.E.

Oklahoma City nonprofit City Care's new shuttle program called Mobile Outreach and Engagement provides free rides from local homeless shelters and homeless service providers to agencies where people may apply for and obtain documents like birth certificates, state identification cards, driver's licenses and Social Security cards.

Staci Sanger, City Care's chief development officer, said the nonprofit's leaders realized that many people experiencing homelessness needed a way to get to and from various agencies, or they may simply need a way to get from a shelter to a service provider for meetings with case managers helping them transition and gain a better footing in life.

Sanger said City Care had a soft launch of the new shuttle program, and about 1,100 people have used the service. M.O.E. shuttle routes run five days a week and include local homeless shelters, other homeless service providers, the downtown library, Embark's downtown Transit Center, local tag agencies, state agencies like the Department of Motor Vehicles and Department of Human Services, and federal agencies like Social Security offices.

More: Music with City Care's Whiz Kids: Whiz Kids is music to his ears

Sanger said the two shuttles have offered City Care another way to offer support to people beyond the shelter service provided at the City Care Night Shelter, a low-barrier shelter the nonprofit opened in 2021.

"Mobility is a huge barrier for folks," she said. "So, now we also have this opportunity for outreach. In addition to our shuttle all day, we have a team who's going out into encampments and meeting folks exactly where they are to offer case support and services to them."

Dan Straughan, executive director and founder of the Homeless Alliance, shared similar views. The Homeless Alliance's WestTown Homeless Resource Campus and WestTown Day Shelter is on the M.O.E. route. The homeless resource center is a hub where various homeless service providers have case managers and other representatives available to help people experiencing homelessness.

"Transportation presents a huge barrier for so many of our clients trying to end their homelessness," Straughan said.

He said the Homeless Alliance is thankful that City Care is meeting this need through the MOE program.

"It's a great example of the collaborative nature of our community and how all of us can work together to make an impact for our neighbors experiencing homelessness," Straughan said.

Telling story of caring

Sanger said the shuttle service is the latest program developed by City Care, but the organization has launched other projects and services in addition to the low-barrier shelter. She said the nonprofit hopes to shed light on some of these programs and partner groups at "The Odyssey Project," a fundraiser set for 7 to 9 p.m. Aug. 31 on the sixth floor of the Santa Fe Parking Garage. Sanger said proceeds from the fundraiser will support the organization's ongoing work with people "living in the margins."

She described the fundraiser as an evening of conversation, art, food and most of all, a "storytelling gathering."

"This event exists to challenge the community's notions of what poverty looks like, why it occurs, what each individual can do, and why they should," Sanger said.

Mallory O'Neill, co-chair for The Odyssey Project, said she's been a proud participant of the special event.

"The night is always magical -- we cry, laugh, have important conversations and most importantly, leave with action plans on how we can fill the gaps for our unhoused neighbors in this community," she said.

More: Low-barrier shelter opens in OKC: City Care nonprofit to open new low-barrier shelter for Oklahoma City's homeless community

Sanger said City Care likes to have the annual fundraiser in different and sometimes unusual places. The fundraiser was held last year at Oklahoma Contemporary, and on a vacant floor of a downtown Oklahoma City building another year.

She said this year's event will feature an inspirational short film about St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral's decision to open the doors of the downtown church to the homeless during winter weather. The Rev. Katie Churchwell, dean of St. Paul's, and the Rev. Sarah Smith, curate and priest at the cathedral, along with church volunteers, helped provide warmth and shelter for many people seeking a haven from the frigid weather.

Sanger said City Care chose to highlight St. Paul's efforts to help and build relationships with people experiencing homelessness because "it really definitely takes all of us."

"We've just been so inspired by them because they're using what resources they have for people," Sanger said. "The major differences between me and someone that we're serving is that I've had a network of people in my life who have championed for me, who have advocated for me, who have offered me jobs, who have supported me in my education and, for what I would say the majority of folks that we're serving with these programs, that's not always the case."

Sanger said while some people gained information about City Care with the opening of the night shelter, most people know about the nonprofit through its "legacy" program Whiz

Kids, which has served about 14,000 students in its 27-year history. Through City Care's Whiz Kids program, inner-city churches and suburban churches are connected together to offer free tutoring and mentoring to children in first through sixth grades at Oklahoma City metro-area schools.

Other City Care programs include Pershing Center, which offers 60 units of supportive permanent housing and celebrated its 20 anniversary this summer. Sanger said City Care also has invested in duplexes and other homes — about 52 units — in the Westlawn Gardens neighborhood to provide more supportive permanent housing.

'The Odyssey Project'

For more information about City Care's "The Odyssey Project" fundraiser set for Aug. 31 at the Santa Fe Parking Garage, go to CityCareOKC.org/TheOdysseyProject. Proceeds from this event will support City Care's ongoing work to care well for those on the margins.