



## Halifax shelter provides safe place for the night and community for all

March 23, 2015 By Charmaine Dymond 2 Comments



*(I'm kicking off a regularish series about local organizations and volunteer opportunities with a look at Out of the Cold Emergency Winter Shelter. Interested in being featured? [Email me!](#))*

Here's a helping moment for you to consider: Would you offer your only umbrella to someone in need on a rainy day?

[i/03/Sleeping-Room1.jpg](#) you knew you'd be spending much of that day outside?

### Tweets by @HfxHelps

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@HfxHelps

A great turn out means a great community!  
This story is so heartwarming. #HalifaxHelps

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## Halifax shelter provides safe place for the night and community for all

Here's a helping moment for you to consider: Would you offer your only umbrella to someone in need on a rainy day?

How about if you knew you'd be spending much of that day outside?

Being on the receiving end of such kindness is just one of Diana's many good memories from her years of volunteering at [Out of the Cold Emergency Winter Shelter](#) (OTCS), which works out of the

basement of St Matthew's United Church in downtown Halifax.

It was one of those winter mornings that Halifax, unfortunately, does so well: cold and wet. Diana was finishing up her shift at Out of the Cold when one of the guests of the shelter asked her if she was walking home. When she confirmed that she was, he offered her his umbrella.

"Of course I didn't take it, but I thought, wow, I'm walking home but then I'll be somewhere warm with dry clothes. You're looking at a day on the streets and you're concerned about me and you're offering me your umbrella. That's always stuck with me," recalls Diana.

This neighbourly act of kindness isn't an isolated incident at OTCS. In fact, this sense of community is one reason Val, who has volunteered with the shelter since it started seven years ago, keeps coming back.

"It is one of the most remarkable communities that I've ever been a part of. And that's about the people that work on the team that run the shelter but it's also very much about the people who access the shelter," says Val.

Though certainly Out of the Cold's main purpose is to offer a warm place to stay for the night to people who need it, the community nature of the shelter is also not a happy accident. OTCS started as a community response to another shelter, Pendleton Place, closing in 2008. That closure led to a crisis on the streets of Halifax in terms of access to shelter, says Val, and "so the decision was to respond to that by starting a community-based organization that would attempt to address those needs."

"The philosophy of the shelter is that it's run by and for a community of people. So our decision making model is consensus-based, we make all decisions as a team, we work very hard to create community with the people who access our shelter," says Val. "The community dimension works on a number of levels."

Although the shelter has a handful of paid staff, it is dependent on the 200+ volunteers who do the bulk of the work: everything from working frontline shifts helping guests, to making meals and cleaning, to fundraising, to donating food and clothing. Even the organizing committee is made up completely of volunteers.

This strong community works together to provide a safe and welcoming refuge from the cold during the winter months, usually from the end of November to the end of April. Guests can only access the shelter from 9pm to 8am, and although OTCS gives each guest a packed lunch for the day, guests still need to find a warm, dry place to make it through to the evening. With the weather Halifax has been having lately, that's no easy task.

When the forecast looks especially bleak, staff and volunteers at OTCS work with other shelters and services across the city and go into extreme overdrive to open up spaces and services to people who need them, says Val. It's not a small job: in 2014, over 1700 people stayed at a shelter in Halifax, according to Halifax's Homelessness Partnering Strategy.

But working together like this is the norm rather than the exception. OTCS checks in with other

shelters on a daily basis, for example to see what beds are available elsewhere so they can divert people “to their shelter if possible since they have more resources than we do,” says Val. That also helps to keep Out of the Cold’s beds – only 15 – open for people who cannot access the other shelters.

OTCS also acts as an access point to health and housing services. Working with other organizations like this means that OTCS is able to expand its ability to help even with its limited resources.

Still, Diana acknowledges that the limited resources can be very challenging. “We fill our 15 beds and we try to take drop-ins as much as we can but sometimes you have to say, ‘I’m sorry we’re absolutely full, can I give you a warm coat and some food, but we’re full’. That is very, very hard, especially on cold winter nights.”

Laureen, who has been volunteering with OTCS for four years, admits she finds letting go difficult, and often finds herself at home worrying about how a particular guest is doing. “I often have trouble disengaging,” she says, but adds that “it’s really helped me put things in perspective.”

She points out that volunteers don’t have to work directly with guests. There are many behind-the-scenes jobs that are essential in running the shelter. And even this late in the season – the shelter will be closing on May 1 – there are still jobs they need help with. (You can read about what help they’re looking for at the bottom of this post.)

Emergency shelters are only a temporary way of dealing with homelessness, Diana admits. “But for those 15 people who are otherwise on the streets it is an extremely valuable service and so being able to be part of that strikes me as a useful way to try and make our community a little bit more compassionate,” she says.

This is Diana’s sixth year of volunteering at Out of the Cold. It would seem she’s hooked: “Other than when I’m at work or with my family I really can’t think of anywhere else that I’d rather be than at the shelter doing that work and working with our guests.”

*Are you interested in helping out at Out of the Cold? Please email Kayleigh at [donations4otcs@gmail.com](mailto:donations4otcs@gmail.com) if you can help:*

*– Transporting laundry to and from the laundromat. This is a time commitment of less than an hour each week (or every two weeks), on Monday, Wednesday, or Friday morning.*

*– Daytime Assistance. The Daytime Assistance Team meets for three hours on the second, fourth, and fifth Wednesday mornings of each month to process donations and make improvements to the shelter space.*

*– Post-season Cleanup. OTCS needs to thoroughly clean and pack up the shelter before leaving St. Matthew’s for the summer. We are scheduling groups to come in to help with cleanup May 4 – May 10. Does your office group/sports team/family/class/co-workers/*