

“Warming Place” for homeless open two days a week at Legion

By Virginia Bullington

vbullington@inkym.com What does it feel like to spend the winter on Nantucket sleeping in a tent in the woods or in an abandoned car? Not having a place to live can be bone-chillingly cold and very lonely, Unitarian Church Rev. Linda Simmons said. “Many people say to me, ‘Well, why don’t they just leave the island? This is not the right place to be homeless. There is no place for them here. Why are they putting themselves at risk in this way?’ “These folks feel that even though there is no place for them to warm up, and in many ways, they are risking their lives to be here, they feel that Nantucket is their home and find comfort knowing that they can find a person walking down the street who will know them,” she said.

Simmons formed the ACK Homelessness Team last year, in an attempt to address the needs of the homeless on-island, who she prefers to call unhoused, who feel that they lack a formal voice or advocate in the island community.

“I do feel that we have a moral and ethical obligation, even if it is just for the winter, to provide houseless people with a chance at survival on this island of such extraordinary wealth,” she said.

The first step for the ACK Homelessness team is offering what is being called The Warming Place, open two days a week from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. in the American Legion hall on Washington Street beginning Dec. 13.

“I’ve been here eight and a half years and I have been working with the homeless for my whole tenure. We call them unhoused because Nantucket is their home,” Simmons said. “We landed on the idea of a warming place after doing a lot of research and calling around to other Unitarian Churches that opened similar programs during COVID.”

The Warming Place will provide breakfast and lunch, cots to sleep on, newspapers, books and games, and a sense of sanctuary for those struggling with homelessness. It is a small start, Simmons acknowledged, but she hopes the service will be able to expand.

“I’ve been talking to some folks who are unhoused about this effort and there is some disappointment because, you know, I’ve been working on this for eight years and two days a week 9 to 1 is not exactly what people had hoped for the winter. They wanted

more, of course,” Simmons said.

“We are hoping this warming center two days a week will blossom into more than that next winter.”

“They keep themselves well-hidden for very good reasons, of course, and we have a stake in a certain Nantucket we advertise to the world,” Simmons said. “And though I don’t disagree that that is an important stake, it is an incomplete picture of who we are as a people.”

The focus of the initiative is specific to islanders who are unable to work, may be unhoused due to mental health or addiction issues, or have experienced a prolonged lack of consistent housing, as opposed to those who may be couch surfing and have insecure housing.

Volunteers and donations will be essential to expanding the program. Simmons particularly encourages volunteering, not only to help others, but also because she believes the experience will engender empathy in participants.

“Even if you can’t volunteer for a whole shift, just come in to learn the stories of the people inside,” Simmons said. “When I started working with people who are homeless I had so many internal judgments. It took me time to understand that I don’t know anything.”

Her ultimate goal is to establish a homeless shelter on-island, a project she acknowledges may be initially controversial.

“One of the first worries that comes up is that if we open a homeless shelter here, people from all over will come, and it’s not an unfounded concern,” Simmons said. “To address that concern we were thinking that if we could have the donation of a private house and a team of people with backgrounds in social work and counseling, that we could set our own criteria. One of them would certainly be to have lived on the island for a certain amount of time, so that we know we are housing members of our community.”