

HISTORY OF THE CRESTVIEW AREA SHELTER FOR THE HOMELESS

The journey of the Crestview Area Shelter for the Homeless (CASH) began with one person's walk and prayer.

In 2008, after 35 years of teaching and three years of retirement, Ann Sprague was taking her daily health walk, a time she often used to pray. As she asked "God, what would you have me do?" she realized she should have worn a jacket. Suddenly, she wondered where homeless people went to get jackets. Where were their homes? What did they do? She knew that homeless people existed, but—like many others—when she saw a homeless person, she turned her head and walked away. From that point forward, Ann began to truly "see" homeless people. Everywhere she turned, they were brought to her attention: in magazine features, newspaper articles, and even John Grisham's novel, "The Street Lawyer," in which a main character decides to stay sober because he sees a drunk homeless man every day.

God seemed to be calling Ann out of her comfort zone. She began to wonder what could be done to help the homeless, especially in times of very cold weather. She read in the newspaper that a group of people and churches in Ft. Walton Beach were setting up cold night shelters—temporary lodging for when the temperature is forecast to drop below 40°F overnight—for the winter. Ann began to wonder exactly how cold night shelters worked, so she called Yvonne Franklin and Lydia Barton, who were mentioned in the article. They came to Crestview the next day to discuss the logistics of cold night shelters, and they encouraged Ann to get involved because no one else was doing it for the Crestview area. Volunteer churches would provide shelter and food, and donations for blankets, cots, and extra funds could be requested from the community, the Red Cross, and the United Way.

Ann had some doubts and concerns. She felt inexperienced and out of her depth. Ann asked God, "Who am I to set this program up?" and God sent others to aid and assist: Yvonne and Lydia answered most of her questions; the Red Cross came through with 10 cots; the United Way, under the leadership of Bill Robinson, provided a pull-behind trailer that could be used to move blankets and cots from church to church; and about 40 people showed up to a meeting at the First Presbyterian Church. Those who attended said they felt that God was asking them to do something to help the homeless, poor, and needy in the area. Ann met many new friends, and she also had the backing of her own church family, the Community of Christ. Upon hearing what God had placed on Ann's heart, Carl Hope, Ann's pastor at the time, said he was "stunned," and that he did not know how to approach or speak to a homeless person. After working with them, he realized he could talk to them just like anyone else. Despite her fears and uncertainties, Ann found scriptures that encouraged her. Many people struggle with difficult questions of life, and thus suffer unnecessarily. God weeps for the poor, displaced, mistreated, and diseased. Ann began to understand that our own community working together could truly be an instrument of peace. God values every person on earth, and he gave his son, Jesus, for all of us. The worth of a person is impossible to quantify.

2008 has been called the second great depression. The construction industry went bust. Jobs dried up. Many who had worked hard all their lives suddenly found themselves unable to work because the jobs had disappeared.

Ann's group had no idea how many homeless people were in the area, but they quickly discovered a great need, first with 50 people, and quickly growing to 200! As they met people in need, they built connections and realized the depth of their needs. Group members drove around town to hand out water, sandwiches, and blankets. After the meeting at the First Presbyterian Church, the group decided to start the cold weather shelter program in Crestview. Ann went to many churches and asked to use their church building one night per week. Four churches responded to that call. That first winter saw 40 cold nights. One church was unable to provide a cold night shelter but offered to host a soup kitchen, and more churches followed suit by offering to run soup kitchens. The list of services grew, and within a few years seven different churches were operating cold night shelters—one for each night of the week, and soup kitchens were

available seven days a week. Only one person showed up to the first soup kitchen, but that number quickly grew to 35, then 40, and then to more than 100.

The Crestview Area Shelter for the Homeless was founded by community members who recognized a critical need for cold night shelter in the Crestview area. What began with one person's walk and prayer has become CASH: "a beacon of hope—a source of help."

For the past 18 years, CASH has grown and expanded into the community service hub it is today.

In August 2014, the shelter became a 501(c)(3) and adopted the name Crestview Area Shelter for the Homeless.

In 2015, the Methodist church generously donated a building, and the group opened a day-service shelter offering showers, laundry, clothing, mail service, food, and assistance with obtaining identification, Social Security benefits, food stamps, birth certificates, and more. More volunteers came on board, and the shelter began receiving donations of money and clothing. The shelter operated for three years at the donated location.

In 2016, CASH was awarded Challenge & Emergency Solutions Grants, hired two case workers (Ann & Chris Snyder), and expanded services. With assistance from Tom and Denise Buscavage, Ann wrote the first grant proposal. Karo Berardi joined the team and began writing grant proposals and providing assistance.

In June 2019, Ann received a phone call from a friend, who wanted to show Ann her new workplace. She gave Ann a tour of the building at 120 Duggan Avenue, and then asked if CASH would like to use the 6,000+ square foot building as a homeless shelter! CASH partnered with Embrace Florida Kids and leased the building, which had 10 bedrooms, a dining area and commercial kitchen, a spacious front room, and offices. At the new location, CASH was able to expand services to include overnight shelter and day services. The community truly stepped up, often anticipating needs before the staff and volunteers, and donations began pouring in. Bunk beds, washers and dryers, towels and washcloths, and shower curtains were donated. CASH began hosting cold night shelters, and church members provided food.

In 2022, the shelter began administering limited medication and medical aid with the help of a registered nurse.

In 2024, CASH expanded to assist low-income individuals in need from Okaloosa and Walton counties and began providing rent and utility assistance to aid in preventing homelessness.

In 2025, nine part-time employees and numerous volunteers joined the team, and CASH became "a beacon of hope—a source of help."

CASH provided the following major services in 2025:

- Outreach: Served more than 2,000 outreach clients,
- Health: Administered medications and medical care to 1,776 clients
- Emergency Overnight Shelter: Sheltered 100+ clients
- Food: provided food boxes to more than 40 families weekly and as needed in emergencies, bag lunches 7 days a week (9,260+ total), fed sheltered clients 2 meals a day (averaging 24 clients daily), fed cold night shelter clients 2 meals per stay on 57 nights.
- Assistance: Housing and utility aid provided to prevent families from becoming homeless.

In 2026, CASH is blessed to be in its seventh year of operating out of our building at 120 Duggan Avenue.