

## Winter Youth Shelter Proposal – Some Frequently Asked Questions

⇒ **What is the proposed project and what First Congregational Church's role in it?**

We have the opportunity to host a Winter Youth Shelter. The Shelter would be operated by Northwest Youth Services and would primarily be funded by the City of Bellingham. Our role would be one of host: offering a portion of our unfinished basement rent-free to supplement The Ground Floor with sleeping space. The program would host up to 35 young people (under age 25) for twelve hours a night from December 1, 2019 through February 29, 2020.

⇒ **Why are we considering this question on such a short timetable?**

The Trustees wrestled with the question of whether it was appropriate to bring this question to the wider church given the short timetable. Often, when First Congregational makes important decisions about our community outreach, we are able to spend months or even years talking widely, asking questions, and opening up lines of communication between various boards, other church members, community partners and neighbors.

In this case, the possibility of hosting the shelter space arose in September because of some newly available city funding and a bold proposal from NWYS. Representatives from the city were able to walk through the space to see if the shelter is possible on Tuesday, October 15, and the Trustees considered the proposal over the week.

The City of Bellingham was hoping to hear from our congregation by November 1, but they are able to wait for a final decision from us until after our Congregational Meeting on November 10. It is certainly a challenge to have such an important conversation well in a short time period, but the Trustees decided that we are up to this challenge!

⇒ **How will this affect the current program space of First Congregational Church?**

Because the proposed Winter Youth Shelter will use a relatively small portion of our basement, it won't have a major impact on many of our programs. Fortunately, neither Fresh Start nor Family Promise will have to move their equipment and items from the basement.

Unfortunately, for the three months that the shelter will operate, we will temporarily displace about half of the storage we currently give to Interfaith Coalition, namely storage that is mostly used for furniture. Our Mission & Justice Board is voting to allot some of the congregation's Local Mission funds to defray any costs associated with this move, and we are excited to help mobilize volunteers to help with the move if that's helpful for Interfaith Coalition. Our staff have had some initial conversations with

Interfaith about how to minimize the impact on this temporary dislocation, and we will continue to be in conversation with them should the Winter Youth Shelter move forward.

There's also a small amount of First Congregational storage currently in the space, but our Facilities & Maintenance staff has a plan to move these items elsewhere during the program's operation.

⇒ **Is the unfinished basement space appropriate for a shelter? What changes will have to be made?**

Recently, our staff and NWYS staff walked through the space with representatives of the City of Bellingham's housing, building, and fire departments. With some minimal changes and with some specific staffing plans, the space can be made appropriate for this use. NWYS will supply cubicle-style partitions to wall off the shelter space from the rest of the unfinished basement (to be installed just north of Fresh Start's space) and the Trustees are exploring some additional alterations. NWYS is committed to covering any of the minor costs that the congregation might incur by hosting this program, and they will also be paying for the extra heat and utilities that the program would require.

One of the Trustees' first concerns was about fire safety; the unfinished side of the basement was not built for overnight occupancy. Fortunately, the space is covered by the existing sprinkler system, and the proposed partition would shorten the space and the distance from the exit. The proposed occupant load is lower than what would require a second exit. In addition, the existing wall coverings, both the drywall of the finished side and the fire protection on the unfinished side, are greater than what the Fire Inspector was looking for. Finally, the fact that there will be constant supervision of the site helps to make this temporary usage safer.

⇒ **Will there need to be an official agreement with the partners if this project moves forward?**

Yes. Trustees' first thought is that the appropriate instrument to formalize this partnership (should the project be approved) is an addendum to The Ground Floor lease, drafted by our Advisory Committee with aid from legal professionals. It might turn out that another document is more appropriate, but the Trustees have instructed staff to facilitate that process.

⇒ **How will the neighborhood feel about a Winter Youth Shelter at First Congregational?**

NWYS is committed to be a good neighbor in all their programs. The impact of The Ground Floor on the neighborhoods surrounding the congregation has been, from all accounts, quite minimal and positive. The combination of The Ground Floor program

space and hours with the Winter Youth Shelter hours means that NWYS staff can minimize opportunities for big groups of youth to gather outside the building.

Certainly, some neighbors will have concerns and ideas about a Winter Youth Shelter in their neighborhood. Our staff and NWYS' staff look forward to conversations with neighbors about how this project will operate, how best to be good neighbors, and any other questions that arise. There will probably also be opportunity for congregational members to talk with neighbors, should we move forward with the process.

- ⇒ **What are the precise hours of the program? What will happen in The Ground Floor while the Winter Youth Shelter is operational? How does this program support the existing programs at The Ground Floor? Will \_\_\_\_ be allowed in the shelter?**

These program questions are great questions to bring to NWYS staff at the after-church conversations, and we'll share widely as we hear more details from them about their more exact plans for the space.

- ⇒ **How was the number of beds chosen? Could the program be hosted in the existing space at The Ground Floor?**

Thirty-five beds was the right balance between funding and staffing; basically, government funding for shelters is often on a per bed basis, and NWYS wants to ensure that they can have two trained staff awake and on-site at all times. Because of this number of beds, and because The Ground Floor was designed to be program space and not shelter space, the finished space of The Ground Floor is not appropriate for shelter use.

- ⇒ **Will the program operate every day or just when it's very cold? Who gets to stay there?**

This shelter would operate every day from the beginning of December to the end of February. It's part of a wider City of Bellingham strategy to respond to our current housing crisis, which includes both other Winter Shelters and Cold Weather Emergency Shelters throughout the city. This space will just be for young people under the age of 25, and to our knowledge it's the first of its kind in Bellingham.

- ⇒ **Why is this program different than the original proposal for The Ground Floor?**

As you may know, the original hope for The Ground Floor was to build a daytime program space for Northwest Youth Services. This project has been very successful!

Now, Northwest Youth Services could temporarily expand their programming to an overnight shelter space. Such a program could not operate successfully without The Ground Floor space and program, and the opportunity to run and fund such a program was not foreseen when The Ground Floor was under construction.

The original scope of The Ground Floor continues to be a permanent priority for Northwest Youth Services. No matter what the congregation decides about hosting an overnight space, The Ground Floor will continue to operate during daytime hours.

⇒ **Does First Congregational need to provide volunteers?**

No, the program will be fully staffed by Northwest Youth Services. However, there will be opportunities for First Congregational Church members and friends, as well as other supporters of NWYS and community members to get involved.

⇒ **How does this project fit into our congregation's mission?**

First Congregational gathers to *Welcome All, Grow in Faith, and Live God's Love, Justice, Compassion ...* While this shelter will not be a religious project, it does give us more opportunities to grow in our own faith as we consider the very real challenges of homelessness in our community. It provides us with an opportunity to extend a very special kind of welcome, and it is one of MANY opportunities to live out love, justice, and compassion in our community and beyond. It remains to be seen whether this is the right project for First Congregational in this season--please pray for discernment in our community!