

## New idea sparks hope for homeless help

By [KAYLEY MENDENHALL](#), Chronicle Staff Writer

A group of religious leaders in Bozeman has been working for years to develop a plan to help the homeless.

And for years, they've run into obstacles.

"I've been involved in this since the beginning," Roxanne Klingensmith, deacon at St. James Episcopal Church in Bozeman, said Tuesday. "We've been at this an awful long time and it's time to go forward."

Klingensmith and about 20 other members of the Gallatin Valley Interfaith Association met at Christ the King Lutheran Church Tuesday night to learn about a national model for stabilizing homeless families that could be applied in Bozeman.

For the first time in a long time, they talked with a sense of hope.

Their hope comes from the work of Karen Olson, a New Jersey woman, who started the Interfaith Hospitality Network in 1986. The nonprofit organization helps groups of churches in communities across the country to shelter and stabilize homeless families -- without actually building a shelter.

"We have 96 affiliates in 112 communities in 31 states," Olson said. "More than 95,000 volunteers are involved and more than 3,500 congregations."

The way the program works is fairly simple. At least 10 congregations in a community pull together and form a nonprofit branch of the network. The network raises money through grants and fund-raisers to hire a local director to coordinate the program.

Up to five homeless families, or a maximum of 14 people, are screened and allowed into the program at a time. They must have children and must have been sober for at least 10 months.

Each church takes a turn hosting the families for one week from Sunday afternoon through Sunday morning. Volunteers cook meals for the families and stay overnight with them in the church.

During the day, the homeless families are sent to a center to meet with social workers in hopes of finding permanent housing and jobs.

On average, families stay in the program for seven weeks before finding a home, Olson said. Each of the network's programs usually help between 30 and 45 families a year.

"This is about stabilization. Having worked in this field for a long time, I know it takes time to stabilize families," Klingensmith said. "It's about empowering them, not enabling them to stay where they are."

A group of Billings churches is working on a network there and plans to start serving families in

October, said Lyla Dyer of First Congregational Church in Billings.

"My church is very, very busy," Dyer said. "But there is room. Even in the busy, busy churches, there is space."

In Bozeman, many religious leaders are excited about creating a network. They plan to meet again at 7 p.m., July 27, at Christ the King, to keep the momentum going.

And they hope that anyone interested in helping, regardless of religious affiliation, will attend.

"This is not about proselytizing, this is about faith and care," said Shelley Wickstrom, pastor at Christ the King. "Do talk it up."

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