



**HOPEFUL
HOMELESS**

BY BEN SWENSON

WILLIAMSBURG'S LONG-IGNORED HOMELESS POPULATION IS STARTING TO GET THE SHELTER AND SUPPORT IT NEEDS

Folks are beginning to trickle into the shelter on one of those early-sundown evenings with a decided nip in the air. First, the volunteers show up—generally an older crowd, eager to make sure each station is in shipshape. Then comes the second wave of arrivals—down-on-their-luck locals looking for a place to stay the night. This isn't some urban core in Coastal Virginia, though, where poverty goes hand-in-hand with boarded-up storefronts and newspapers that blow down the street like tumbleweeds. This emergency shelter happens to be an old Presbyterian church, situated on the historic streets of Virginia's colonial capital.



ABOVE: Shoes and clothes are just a few of the donations

BELOW: Volunteers at Williamsburg United Methodist Church prepare for their COFM shelter week.



Homelessness may not be what immediately comes to mind when people think of Williamsburg, but even here, behind weathered brick walls, in the shadow of thrill rides, on the fringes of shopping malls, are neighbors who need a reliable roof over their head. In many respects, the Historic Triangle is similar to other communities in Coastal Virginia, beholden to quirks of economy and geography that prevent one-size-fits-all solutions to pressing problems such as homelessness. But after decades of taking piecemeal stabs at tackling homelessness in Williamsburg, it turns out that an age-old idea—collaboration—is getting results where previous efforts came up short.

Roy Gerardi, director of human and social services for the City of Williamsburg, says that people in the region are homeless for a lot of reasons. Nevertheless, he explains, a couple reasons that cause or complicate homelessness occur in Williamsburg more often than other cities. For instance, many of the positions that are easiest to get in the Historic Triangle come and go with the tourists: hotel housekeepers, theme park attendants, timeshare groundskeepers, restaurant wait staff. In the off-season, especially in January and February, many of those workers are temporarily laid off.

Even when Williamsburg is flush with travelers, many jobs go to out-of-towners, such as commuters from Newport News or Hampton, or foreign workers, all of whom are willing to accept the seasonal employment. Williamsburg consistently has an unemployment rate that's more than double Virginia's average (which, according to the latest figures in September 2013, were 10.6 and 5.3 percent, respectively).

Those lucky enough to have a steady paycheck during the tourist season are often paid minimum wage or not much more. In an area with a higher cost of living than nearby communities, even full-time workers can't make ends meet. Throw a dependent child or two into the mix and you have homelessness just waiting to happen.

Many of Williamsburg's working poor vie for the few affordable apartments or stay in any of the city's numerous budget motels, paying for their shelter on a week-to-week basis. "All it takes is for someone to get the flu, and they're out on the street," says Gerardi.

There's not one poverty-stricken district, one corner of Greater Williamsburg, where the homeless stay or congregate, and that scattered nature has fostered a reluctance among locals to own up to the problem. Williamsburg has long been a community perceived as well-to-do and dependent on a clean image. Appearances are everything.

Williamsburg residents are not only acknowledging that the homeless live among them, but when they're presented an opportunity to help, they turn out in droves.

In Williamsburg proper, residents are not required to set their garbage cans at the street on pick-up day (sanitation workers go behind their homes to retrieve them). Store signs are not permitted to be overly flashy. HOAs enforce strict color palettes in keeping with the city's historic character. For a long time, many Williamsburg residents were loath to concede that homelessness was part of that ethos.

But the figures don't lie. Local school districts enrolled more than 400 homeless students last year. The 2012 Point-In-Time Estimates of Homelessness count, an annual tally of homeless people conducted on a single January night, recorded well over one hundred individuals in Greater Williamsburg staying in shelters or on the streets.

And if Williamsburg didn't already have enough barriers to handling the problem of homelessness, there's geography to consider, too. The community is comprised of three jurisdictions, with boundaries that sometimes defy logic. Colonial Williamsburg, for instance, lies in the city itself. Water Country USA, on the other hand, is in York County. And Williamsburg Premium Outlets are located in James City County.

Individuals seeking assistance might be directed to one of three different social services offices depending on where in Greater Williamsburg they stayed the previous night. That's long been a barrier to providing help, but in the past three years resources to assist homeless people in the Historic Triangle have really blossomed, thanks to a better understanding of the need for programs that transcend these lines.

Gerardi explains, for instance, that local agencies now employ a so-called Homeless Management Information System to share knowledge about individuals across political

and organizational boundaries. This makes it easier to provide the basic services—medical care and employment training—that will move people in need toward stability.

The United Way of Greater Williamsburg as well as Avalon, a shelter for women and children experiencing domestic violence, are other examples of organizations that have been able to better serve Williamsburg's hidden homeless population by taking a regional approach to providing emergency assistance to local needy families. That way, it doesn't matter if a family slept last night on a couch in York, James City or Williamsburg, because there's a pool of resources to help them.

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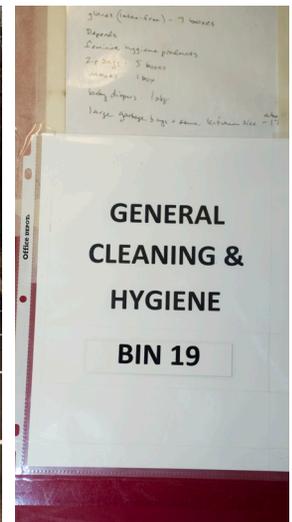
A couple years ago, Renee Collins and Kathy Banfield headed the homeless ministry at Saint Bede Catholic Church. "We researched sheltering the homeless in Williamsburg and realized nobody was doing it for the population at large," says Collins. She explains that there was a generous, though patchy, approach to providing emergency shelter. Churches were

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paying for individuals and families to stay in motels on a case-by-case basis, a system that was letting too many individuals fall through the cracks, which meant some people were literally sleeping in a car or even the woods.

Collins and Banfield set out to change that. They approached Saint Bede's pastor and social outreach coordinators, and researched other faith-based shelter programs in the region: PORT in Newport News, Mission of Hope in Isle of Wight, CARITAS in Richmond. After countless hours of site visits, research, planning and training, Community of Faith Mission was born.

"Although the idea originated at Saint Bede, Williamsburg's communities of faith jumped on board quickly," Collins explains. "The response was immediate and overwhelming and that's what truly got this effort underway. Everybody in Williamsburg has been supportive, from police to city leaders to social services to civic groups."



TOP: The 9 COFM Board Members as they appear in the picture. Renee Ashley Willis, Chris James, Lizzie Hollerith, Bill Johnson, Renee Collins, Pastor Corwin Hammond, Kathy Banfield, Stephanie Turner, and Roy Gerardi

ABOVE: Volunteers at Williamsburg United Methodist Church unload supplies off the trailer for their COFM shelter week.

RIGHT: The COFM logo proudly displayed on the side of the trailer



Folks who show up at the shelter are given meals and clean bedding material for a gender-separated sleeping area. If they need a bus ticket to get to work, they're given that, too. The hosts and partner organizations usually add flourishes to help the individuals make the best of a tough situation: decorated placemats, free haircuts, a Super Bowl party on game day.

The idea is that churches in Greater Williamsburg share their space for emergency shelter on a weekly basis during the coldest weeks of the year. Religious communities, civic organizations and individuals who aren't able to provide space furnish other resources instead, giving manpower, material and money. The first week of January, for instance, Saint Bede, which is in James City County, offered its extra rooms for shelter. The following week, Williamsburg United Methodist Church, which is inside the city limits, opened its doors to local homeless residents.

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Last year, more than 20 host churches and other partners offered emergency shelter to 58 individuals (some for several weeks at a time) during winter's twelve coldest weeks. This year, there are even more partners on board and the time frame has expanded to include six additional weeks.

Next year, Collins says, Community of Faith

Mission hopes to at least maintain this level of service, or better yet, expand the amount of assistance they offer. That way, neighbors will have a safety net for those times when living and working in Williamsburg becomes a little too challenging. [COVA](#)

RESOURCES FOR HOMELESS WILLIAMSBURG RESIDENTS:

Avalon
757-258-5022
www.avaloncenter.org

City of Williamsburg Department of Human Services
757-220-6161
www.williamsburgva.gov

Community of Faith Mission
www.cofm.info

James City County Social Services
757-259-3100
www.jamescitycountyva.gov

United Way of Greater Williamsburg
757-229-2222
www.uwgv.org

York-Poquoson Social Services
757-890-3787
www.yorkcounty.gov



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