



News Release

For immediate release

Nov. 6, 2020

Emergency shelter opens in response to COVID-19 pandemic

BILLINGS, MT – No one should be on the streets of Billings this winter for lack of access to warm, safe shelter. That is why a coalition of more than a dozen local organizations will open Off the Streets Shelter on Nov. 13.

“We cannot go through another winter where we lose people on the streets because they weren’t warm, safe and dry,” said Shawn Hinz, RiverStone Health vice president of Public Health Services. “This has been an amazing group. They have been troubleshooting and collaborating on this community response.”

Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, there has been an increase in unsheltered people in Billings. Some homeless people fear being in crowded shelters. Others are on the streets because existing shelter locations have needed to reduce services during the pandemic.

The shelter at 3311 Second Ave. N., formerly the Western Inn motel, will have 20 individual rooms for sheltering people who are homeless and cannot be served immediately by other shelters. Guests will be able to stay at Off the Streets from 7 p.m. until 7 a.m. daily. The shelter will have overnight awake staff and security. During the day, guests will be connected to needed community services at other locations.

The Community Crisis Center will screen individuals and divert them to Montana Rescue Mission or other shelters, if they can be served there. Off the Streets is a last resort if no other shelter is available.

Off the Streets is a project of the Yellowstone County Continuum of Care. Partners working on Off the Streets include: Housing Authority of Billings, District 7 HRDC, Billings Clinic, Community Crisis Center, St. Vincent de Paul, Montana Rescue Mission, Downtown Business Association, Salvation Army, Tumbleweed, RiverStone Health and Besaw Integrity Consulting.

An even larger group of local organizations in the Continuum of Care is working toward long-term solutions to homelessness in our community. Off the Streets Shelter is a temporary, one-year project to keep people safe while a five-year strategic plan is completed.

This former motel property, now owned by HAB Development, the development arm of the Billings Housing Authority, began serving as Yellowstone County’s COVID-19 quarantine and

isolation site in late October. In addition to the 20 shelter rooms, another 20 rooms are available for people who otherwise have no safe place to quarantine while awaiting test results or no safe place to stay after testing positive for the virus. The people in quarantine and isolation will stay in their rooms 24/7 until healthcare and public health authorities clear them to leave.

Last spring, a temporary MetraPark quarantine facility was set up where multiple people quarantined in one large building. Then, for several months, RiverStone Health operated a 10-bed quarantine and isolation site. The new downtown site is an improvement with handicap access and balconies so people can get fresh air without leaving quarantine.

Funding for the shelter and the quarantine/isolation site is being sought from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

To qualify for federal funding, the shelter cannot house people in large groups. Yellowstone County Health Officer John Felton issued a Health Officer Order mandating shelter safety and health standards required for federal funding. The Order is attached to this news release.

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