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MISSION OF HOPE | A homeless shelter is expanding to accommodate more women

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Mary Geisel, a 60-year-old grandmother, has been living at the Eugene Mission since July. After losing her job as a shuttle driver for a local Marriott hotel, she spent months looking for other work, and then she ran out of money. Then she prayed. Then she went to the mission on West First Avenue.

“I never thought I’d come to the mission,” said Geisel, enjoying a lunch of fried eggs, potatoes and sausage with other women late Tuesday morning. “I have a list of things I want to do before I die, and that wasn’t one of them!” she said. She is now a volunteer at the mission’s Mother and Children’s Center which houses single women and their children.

“There’s no pay, but there are more important things than money,” Geisel said. “I’m safe and I’m warm. When I came here I was very scared. I had heard a lot of things about the mission that weren’t true. I heard it was dirty and they don’t care about you. I was told I couldn’t take a shower here.”

There are not only showers, but donations of clothing and toiletries and other items, Geisel said. “The mission’s here to help you,” she said. “Now I have a purpose in life.”

Geisel is among a growing number of women who have found themselves living in homeless shelters locally and across the nation in recent years as America’s recession has gobbled up jobs and affordable housing.

The fastest growing group of homeless people in the nation is women, said Ernie Unger, the longtime executive director of the mission, which has been at its current site since 1967 and began in downtown Eugene in 1952 as the Shield of Faith Mission.

Thirty-six percent of those in homeless shelters across the country in 2008 were women, compared with 34 percent in 2005, according to the U.S.

Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Annual Homeless Assessment Report. Oregon led the nation in 2008 for a percentage of its residents being homeless at 0.54 percent, or about one in 200 residents, according to the report.

The numbers of homeless women at the Christian-based Eugene Mission have increased steadily in recent years, Unger said Tuesday. And by the end of the year, the mission plans to have a new building for single women to stay. A new \$1.2 million Women’s Center is in the works that will double to 100 from about

50 the number of women's beds — all adorned, as always, with quilts handmade by local churches. The number of showers will double from five to 10, Unger said. The mission has raised about \$1 million of the cost, all through donations, said the 74-year-old Unger, who has led the mission since 1962.

“We live in this generous community,” Unger said. “And the people have responded very well to what the mission has done.”

Construction is set to begin in April on the new single-story building, to be built on a lot next to the Mother and Children's Center. It will be 12,600 square feet, about a third larger than the current Women's Center's 8,800 square feet, built in 1979. The spaciousness will be in contrast to the current cramped three-story building where the 25 or so bunk beds are not wheelchair-accessible.

“Today's homeless group of women, many of them have a real tough time with those stairs,” Unger said.

About half of all homeless women are victims of domestic violence, said Peggy Whalen, executive director of Eugene's Womenspace. Statistics provided by the Washington, D.C.-based National Coalition for the Homeless back her up. Womenspace, which often refers women to the Eugene Mission, has been doubling up women in rooms at its shelter, at an undisclosed site, in the last couple of years. The shelter took in 325 women and children in 2008, and 401 last year, she said.

“We're also seeing a spike on our help line,” Whalen said, with the number of calls almost doubling in 2009. “Women are staying longer (in domestic violence situations) because the option is being homeless.”

Terry McDonald, executive director of the nonprofit St. Vincent de Paul Society of Lane County, said he has not noticed a spike in homeless women in recent years, but said “there's always been a substantial population (of homeless women).”

At his agency's First Place Family Shelter in Eugene, he has seen an increase in the number of homeless single head-of-household families.

There was a 9 percent increase in the number of homeless families nationwide in 2008, said Neil Donovan, executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless.

Many homeless women often have part-time jobs and children and are stuck in an “economic double bind,” Donovan said.

Susan McPherson, 57, also a grandmother, has been living in the Eugene Mission's Women's Center since August. On Feb. 1, she was hired as part of the mission's program staff.

“I have a safe environment,” she said of living at the mission, which also houses up to 300 men a night. “I have food. I have a lot of support — emotional support, spiritual support. I don't have to worry about being on the streets. I've done that before. I don't want to do that again.”

