



Homeless Gear

*Offering Hope
and a Hand Up*

by rhea maze



“I think most people would prefer that (homeless people) were invisible,” says a formerly homeless Fort Collins man.

Ken John is not most people. One day, he observed a man carrying all of his belongings in a worn trash bag slung over his shoulder, and something clicked. Rather than wish the problem away and move on with his day, John went home and surveyed the mountain of outdoor gear he had piled in his basement, accrued over a lifetime of being an outdoorsman, and thought about how badly that man needed gear like this to survive the elements and get back on his feet.

When John retired in 2008, he founded Homeless Gear, a local nonprofit organization that has since distributed over \$5.3 million worth of outdoor gear, clothing, hygiene products and food items to homeless individuals and families across Colorado.

“We specialize in collecting outdoor gear for survival,” says executive director David Rout. And while the distribution program still fulfills John’s original vision of helping homeless people meet basic needs, the organization offers a continuum of services through six different programs that help with every step of the journey from homelessness to self-sufficiency.

“We walk the path with them,” says Linda Nuss, program director of Homeless Gear’s Hand Up program.

In 2014, Hand Up helped secure 125 jobs for homeless and near-homeless job seekers by partnering with local businesses and tackling barriers that would otherwise prevent these individuals from getting back into the workplace. One of the most common barriers Nuss sees is the state of their self-confidence.

“A lot of the homeless people I encounter assume they aren’t employable—they’ve been beaten down so much they don’t even know their capabilities,” Nuss says.

The One Village One Family program pairs volunteer mentors with homeless families to help them reintegrate back into the community. Launched in Oct. 2014, the program has already helped two formerly homeless families secure

Homeless Gear’s mission is to provide homeless men, women and children with the supplies they need to survive on the streets and the support and companionship they need to navigate the path from homelessness to self-sufficiency.

“If each of us tries to help the homeless and those in poverty in one small way, eventually we can end homelessness.”

– Sister Mary Alice Murphy

housing. Dedicated Navigators, a program that joined Homeless Gear in May 2015, helps individuals apply for benefits.

In Larimer County, families with children make up over 60 percent of the homeless population. Homeless Gear’s Children in Need program works to establish normalcy in the lives of homeless children by protecting them from the elements, meeting their basic health and hygiene needs and helping them participate in school.

Since 2012, the organization’s outreach van has been patrolling the streets of Fort Collins three nights and one afternoon per week. Volunteers staff each shift and provide the homeless people they encounter with supplies, information, resources and a listening ear.

“Nothing we do is possible without the dedication of our volunteers,” Rout says.

Homelessness is a complex and challenging issue to address. The National Coalition for the Homeless states that homelessness is most often the result of a

shortage of affordable housing and an increase in the number of people living in poverty.

“There are so many different variables that go into someone being homeless,” Rout says. “There’s no one reason—and there’s no one fix.” The most important thing Homeless Gear does is provide hope to those currently caught in the nightmare of homelessness. And basic survival comes first. Without that, it’s impossible to move toward long-term goals such as housing, employment and self-sufficiency.

“We offer a bridge,” Nuss says. “It’s all about building relationships and making connections.”

And the reward is in the small, daily successes. Such as when Nuss stopped the outreach van to check in with a homeless man she’d never met. He’d just arrived in Fort Collins after riding his bicycle from Louisiana. After chatting with him, she offered him a bag of food. As she was leaving he said, “Our conversation meant more to me than this food.”

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s annual point-in-time estimates of homelessness across the country, 578,424 people were homeless in the U.S. on a single night in Jan. 2014. Of those, 10,028 were in Colorado.



How you can help:



Homeless Gear accepts volunteers for its programming and collects outdoor gear, essential and basic outdoor clothing, non-perishable food and hygiene products.

1305 Duff Drive, Unit #5, Fort Collins
homelessgear.org • (970) 658-9878