

A Place Called Serenity

The city of Port Angeles borders Olympic Park in the far northwestern corner of Washington State. To reach this picturesque metropolis from Seattle, you'll have to hitch a ferry for a 40-minute shuttle on the Puget Sound, then buckle down for a two hour cruise along winding roads. One of them will eventually take you to Clallam County.

Words like pristine, wilderness and, of course, rural come to mind. Yet it is here, amid much scenic beauty, you will find Serenity House and meet people who are dealing with some of the same life issues you think you left behind in the big city.

"Homelessness is not unique to the big cities," says Kathy Wahto, executive director of Serenity House, which has evolved as the largest provider of services for people experiencing homelessness on the Olympic peninsula. There's a perception that only people in urban areas experience homelessness, but homelessness is part of our reality. People lose their jobs, experience domestic violence, drug use, and make visits to the emergency rooms like everywhere."

What distinguishes Serenity House from many other places providing services to homeless people in rural America is its partnerships and proactive approach that's yielding results in ending homelessness.

Six years ago, the county started work on its 10-year plan to end homelessness and, with a collaborative approach that blends Federal resources, including McKinney -Vento homeless assistance grants, with state, county and private efforts, they can be considered a model for rural areas.

Wahto says the county is well on its way to reach, and may even exceed, its goal to end homelessness by 2015. They have reduced homelessness from more than 1000 individuals to about 600 in less than three years.

The Council's regional coordinator Paul Carlson, who coordinates the Council's homeless strategy in the nation's northwest, says that coordination of local effort, combined with strong political leadership and aggressive tactics are hallmarks of the county's 10-year plan to end homelessness.

Serenity House is a non-profit that started 25 years ago focusing on recovery for people with substance abuse. Today its mission is to eliminate homelessness by providing safe, decent and affordable housing, including emergency shelter with appropriate services, to homeless families and individuals in Clallam County.

Need for assistance ranges from lack of affordable housing to unemployment, to domestic violence, drug use and youth problems. Those

seeking assistance include families with children and members of the five tribal nations.

“Every day we are learning how the power of collaboration, strong leadership and partnership with government agencies can change lives,” says Wahto. “We all play well in the same sandbox. It’s easier to put solutions in place when we work together.”

While negotiating and collaborating with partners is typically serene. With scores of people ambling in and around the house on a daily basis, Wahto says, “I’ll tell you, it is never quiet here at Serenity House. There is always so much to do.”