

# 'I was homeless, and you gave me shelter'

– Matthew 25:35

**By DAVE MYERS**

For 19 years, Marci Smith closed doors. It was part of her job. And it broke her heart.

"One of the worst things was locking people up," she said of her nearly two-decade job in juvenile probation.

Today, she works for Catholic Charities of Southwest Kansas where her job is to open doors — to find homes for the homeless, a sense of security for those escaping violence, a new start for those recently released from prison.

"Here, we work with a lot of the same people, and we don't have to lock them up," said Smith, Director of Family Services.

In 2017, her first full year with Catholic Charities, she helped find homes for 40 adults and 41 children.

So far in 2018, among those she has helped include a woman who had been living in a car for weeks with several of her eight children. Another had five children and were living in a home already over-crowded with numerous extended family members.

As the wind chill reached record lows, a young man was sleeping in a display shed in front of a hardware store. It took a while to find the young man a home, even after he was kicked out of his shed/shelter.

"He told me not to worry, that he'd been on the streets for a long time, and that he'd be fine," Smith said.

It is these individuals and families — and the many others served by Smith and Catholic Charities — who have been helped by the Vibrant Ministries Appeal.

Much of Smith's funding comes from grants such as the federal HUD grant and the Kansas Emergency Solutions Grant. But it's the unexpected expenses — a family or individual who needs a night or two in a hotel or other emergency assistance, or, say, who needs appliances or even various kitchenware — that are made possible because of the appeal.

When a person is in dire straits and dependent on the kindness of strangers for the basic necessities, meeting those unexpected needs can mean the difference between comfort and misery.

Like all of Catholic Charities of Southwest Kansas, Smith's office takes the teachings of the Lord directly to the people — not in words but in action.

"We use the 'Housing First' model," Smith stressed. "A home comes first, then we talk about income."

The only requirement?

"They have to be homeless to come here," she explained. "That includes living on the street, in a shelter, or if they are fleeing domestic violence."

Once they enter the doors of Catholic Charities, they are given a questionnaire that will assess their needs and prioritize them. As one can imagine, there's a waiting list.

"It's not first come, first served," Smith said. "Housing is based on risk level." The Garden City office currently has 36 people on its waiting list, while the Dodge City office has six.

Catholic Charities tries to get the clients independent within a year, but they can help support them for up to two years.

"Our goal for them is to be self-sustainable."

They are mostly single men who come to the Catholic Charities office, Smith said, but there are couples and children as well. Sadly, there are far more in need than there are resources to meet those needs.

Catholic Charities does not have the staff or financial resources for an unlimited number of clients, so it must try to limit its clients to a total of 16 homes. There are currently seven homes being served in Dodge City, and 11 in Garden City, which adds up to 18.

"Brooke [Hamlin-Lopez, Family Support Specialist], is the case worker for Garden City," Smith said. "This is a difficult population to case manage, so we all work together to help the case management process run more smoothly.

"We pay the first three months' rent and the safety deposit," Smith explained. Every three months, Smith's staff will visit with the clients to reassess their situation.

"We help find them housing and work with landlords," Smith said. "Our clients are never charged more than 30 percent of their income."

And if they don't have some sort of income? Catholic Charities helps them to apply for various programs that will assist them as they get back on their feet. She is "SOAR" certified, which means Smith can help individuals apply for disability if they are homeless or at the risk of homelessness.

"My greatest reward is seeing people make changes in their lives, become self-sufficient," Smith said.

**M**ost of those whom Catholic Charities serves have limited income and often need help with basic necessities once they secure housing. You can help clients be given a warm welcome into their new home with some basic household necessities to get them started.

Needed items include cleaning products (**bucket, mop broom, duster, dust pan, laundry soap, laundry basket, window cleaner, sponges, or cleaning rags**), kitchen items (**dish soap, paper towels, cooking utensils, plates, mugs and cups, pots and pans**), bedroom items (**twin/full sheets, pillows, comforter/blankets, and curtains**), bathroom items (**towels, soap, shampoo, toothbrush and toothpaste, toilet paper, rugs, shower curtains, liner, rings, deodorant, comb, razor, lotion**) other (**diapers, wipes, baby/children hygiene items**).

For more information on creating a "blessing kit," go to <http://catholiccharitiesswks.org/ways-to-help> and click on "Can you spare a blessing kit?" on the lower, left or call (620) 272-0010.