

DOGWOOD HEALTH FOUNDATION IMMEDIATE NEEDS GRANT

Description of Current Need/Project:

The Waynesville Community provides two shelters for the homeless. Each offers two meals per day, shower facilities and a total of 90 beds. The local community treats many of the symptoms of homelessness such as substance abuse and mental health issues as diseases and does not seek to incarcerate individuals unless they have committed a violent crime.

Waynesville's compassionate approach to dealing with homeless individuals has created a destination for both regional and interstate homeless population that far exceeds the Community's ability to house and feed them. The shelters do not permit drug use or violent behavior so many homeless individuals find themselves on the street with no money, no place to stay and nothing to eat. They resort to shoplifting and petty theft for food, tents and money. The businesses that reside between the two shelters are constantly victimized by homeless individuals that have been refused service by the shelters.

The result of these behaviors is a community that is divided into two camps, the group that views the homeless as a group of society's victims in need of support and the group that views the homeless as petty thieves that shoot up drugs and threaten the Town's citizens.

At this juncture the Town needs to develop a process that will bring both groups together to develop a strategy to handle the influx of homeless individuals. No one in the community that has the training and experience to lead the discussion, provide their expertise and help develop a community wide strategy that includes all stakeholders. We believe that a grant from the Dogwood Health Foundation would provide the funds to engage such an expert. The Town would match the Foundation's grant dollar for dollar in order to provide \$50,000 to attract a qualified consultant.

Does your organization serve diverse communities? If So, which ones.

Waynesville is unlike many southern municipalities in that it has a racial breakdown of 92% White, 4.4% Hispanic and 2.7% Black. The Town's most telling diversity is that of income. Waynesville is made up of a wealthy, retired group that reside along the mountain ridges, a group that own businesses and a group that is under employed residing in substandard dwellings and prone to substance abuse. The Town had a thriving industrial sector in Hazelwood into the sixties. Like many other rural communities every industry but two has closed. The Town's median household income is \$34,602 and per capita income is \$25,072. Many of retired mill workers have very little retirement income and their children cannot find jobs that pay a living wage. Another element of income disparity is Waynesville's housing shortage. Affordable housing is being purchased by part time owners and Air BNB speculators. The lack of well-paying jobs, affordable housing and the proliferation of cheap drugs is forcing many people to drug addiction and homelessness. As the numbers of homeless increase, the business owners are demanding that the Town keep them away from the Town's retail areas. The friction between the retail and tourist-based businesses and homeless community increased to the point that the issue became the leading political issue in November's local election. The challenge facing the Town is to develop a line of communication between the wealthy, business and homeless residents. The process would serve to bridge the economic diversity in the Waynesville Community. The reason for our request is to engage an individual with the experience and skill base to bring these competing economic groups together to develop a community strategy to combat the income gap within the Waynesville community.

How does your organization embrace diversity?

Waynesville is unique among NC Towns. It has a history of accepting newcomers with different political views and personal lifestyles. Its residents vary from wealthy retirees from Florida to "Sovereign Citizens" who don't recognize the legitimacy of the US government. It is a challenge to provide a customer focused,

small town, level of service to citizens that are angry that we are not a carbon copy of Palm Beach or that citizens must obey State and local laws. The Town provides one of the largest recreation programs in western NC. It prices its recreational amenities so that citizens at all income levels may participate. The Town runs a summer camp program that provides affordable summer recreation programs to help families with summer day care. It provides financial support to numerous nonprofits that provide a range of services to Haywood County residents. Waynesville supports REACH, a domestic violence organization, the Open Door, an organization that feeds and shelters the homeless citizens of Waynesville, the Pigeon Street Community Center that provides services to the neighborhoods where many of Waynesville's Black and Hispanic residents reside and Mountain Projects which provides affordable housing and other social services to lower income residents of our community. The Town Board reflects the diverse nature of our community. It's five-member board is comprised of both Republicans and Democrats, an openly gay member and a female Mayor Pro Tempore. The Town Board is extremely sensitive to the needs of all racial and income classes within the Town.

Tell us what equity means to your organization and how it influences the work of your organization?

It's the policy of the Town of Waynesville to treat everyone with dignity and compassion regardless of income, race or social status. Our Police purchase food for elderly folks when they answer a call and realize that the couple cannot afford groceries. As we move through the workday our employees are alert to social conditions in the community and frequently contact non profit groups and social services when they encounter families in distress. The Police frequently purchase groceries for elderly citizens after they answer a call at the residence and discover the residents don't have food in the house. Waynesville serves the wealthy residents on the mountain ridges and work to accommodate their service challenges that result from steep, narrow access roads and frequent power outages. We recognize that our topography and weather create anxiety for our elderly residents and the Town provides personal visits during inclement weather, especially when the power is out.

Will this grant help you address any equities and disparities? If so, which one?

The issue of how a Town of 10,000 residents deals with a growing population of homeless residents is splitting the community. The community sponsors two homeless shelters which were created to help residents of Haywood County that find themselves without habitation. Many are victims of rampant drug addiction, some have psychological issues, and some may have simply been kicked out of their parent's homes when they reach eighteen. The escalating homeless population is being caused by the popularity of our current homeless shelters and the law enforcement communities' recognition that homelessness is not a crime. Waynesville is receiving an influx of non-local homeless persons from all the western counties and other States such as Arizona, California, Alaska, Utah, and Georgia. Our inability to handle large numbers of homeless residents is driving them to break into business and residences to squat and steal items that they can sell for cash. The social dilemma that we face in Waynesville is a split in the community between citizens that wish to help the homeless in any way possible and the group that are the victims of the chronic shoplifting, robberies and begging. During a candidate forum the two groups squared off and after two hours of debate it became clear that Waynesville needs to hire a consultant that can provide expertise in strategies for dealing with community homelessness as well as skills in consensus building. With no one at the table that has a background in homelessness the Town sponsored "Committee on Homelessness with flounder.