

The Freshen Up Program:
Providing Dignity One Shower, One Meal, One Neighbor at a Time

STORY AND PHOTO BY LAURA I. WINN

IT'S A THURSDAY morning behind the parking lot gates of Pathway Fellowship Church in Orangevale, and busy volunteers are setting up folding tables and chairs, prepping two portable showers and laying out a spread of home-cooked food. Soon, the group will gather to focus on their purpose: warmly welcoming their unhoused neighbors and building relationships that foster change. This is the weekly Freshen Up Program through the Homeless Assistance Resource Team (HART) of Orangevale and Fair Oaks.

"We want to dignify everybody who comes through our gates," explains Roger Spencer, the program manager for HART of Orangevale and Fair Oaks. "No matter what condition a person is in, they are in need of love, attention and care."

When the gates open on a hot September day, unhoused neighbors enter, sign up for showers, and head to the food table where three smiling ladies wait. Greeting their guests by name, they dish up lasagna, garlic bread, salad and rich chocolate desserts. "Would you like an end piece or a middle piece?" a server asks, offering the simple dignity of choice.

A few people sit near the food table, where volunteers pour refills of cold lemonade, while others choose the shadier spot by the Community Health Workers. Community navigator Gabriella Yost and community support services worker Nate Allen connect interested individuals with food, shelter, medical and transportation resources.

Allen, an Orangevale native who first served his unhoused neighbors as a HART volunteer, sees housing as a big determinant of health, and stresses the importance of keeping resources local and accessible. "Many of the unhoused people here grew up in this community," he explains. "They feel safe here. They don't want to go downtown for services."

Building relationships week after week, Allen's goal is to "help people move forward, get off the streets and get into recovery," he says. "It can be life-changing."

In addition to Community Health Workers, the Freshen Up Program periodically hosts a veterinarian, local barbers, and nursing students from Chamberlain University who provide minor wound care — a vital service to prevent infection from dog bites and foot blisters. HART volunteer Dr. Jerry Olario, a retired emergency medicine physician, oversees their work.

On this day, Olario sanitizes the showers between guests. "I probably saw some of these people in my ER," he says. "Now I see the different side to it."

During the two hours the program operates, about 16 to 19 people can use the warm showers, which run on tankless water heaters and use water and electricity provided by the church.

After showering, participants change into clean clothing donated by their neighbors. They leave with food for themselves and their pets, and some roll out with bicycles provided by the Cameron Park Rotary Club Bicycle Program.

"There are a lot of giving people in our community," Spencer says. "We have about 10 to 15 volunteers per shift. It's probably more than we need, but it's a great problem to have."

For some of the volunteers, it's a ministry. For others, it's personal.

"I have a troubled son," Karen Ames says. "I hope there would be someone out there helping him if he needed it." ■

HART of Orangevale and Fair Oaks, operating as part of the Orangevale-Fair Oaks Community Foundation, is currently seeking a new Fair Oaks location to provide a mid-week meal for just one hour a week. For more information, visit www.hartovfo.org.

