

Salvation Army secures \$5M for emergency rental assistance in Lewis County, Washington

The Centralia (Washington) Corps is helping people avoid homelessness.

The Salvation Army in Lewis County, Washington, is helping more families than ever to stay in their homes, thanks to almost \$5 million in federal emergency rental assistance funds that became available in late April. The Centralia Corps, led by Lts. Ginifer (Gin) and Steven Pack, represents The Salvation Army in Lewis County, and handles most rental assistance requests. It is the only Salvation Army corps in the county of 79,000 people.



This funding is a huge boost from the nearly \$936,000 The Salvation Army received in August 2020 from the Washington State Department of Commerce Eviction Rent Assistance program (ERAP). According to Centralia’s [The Chronicle](#), those funds helped slightly more than 200 renters. The list of those awaiting assistance remained long.

The pandemic, with its economic fall-out, hit Lewis County hard.

“The poverty rate here is around 14 and a half percent,” Gin Pack said. “When you’re living at the poverty rate, you’re usually in a job that depends on a functioning economy. When that falls apart, like it did with COVID-19, you’re in trouble—and the cycle of [poverty](#) is perpetuated.”

The contract is signed for the new grant, and the corps will begin executing it the first of May to help alleviate the ongoing need, keeping in mind the approaching end of the eviction moratorium on June 30.

The new grant guidelines are more complicated than those of the earlier ERAP one. The assistance request must be related to COVID, and tenants have to come up with a reasonable repayment plan for their debt, which can also include past due amounts for utilities. Pack said a local newspaper recently reported that over \$1 million is past due just to utility companies.

The Salvation Army is helping clients figure out how to repay their debt.

“We’re not going to go and pay all of it at once,” Pack said. “We’re prioritizing needs, triaging people.”

The vetting process is a “good thing,” Pack said. “It holds a higher standard to how the money is being spent.”

Handling the rental assistance project is a big job for a small corps, with a staff that originally included the Packs, a social services director and a corps assistant. Two new case managers have joined the team this go-round.

“Everyone had to be all hands on deck for the original [earlier] amount,” Pack said. “After that we thought the pandemic would be over.”

In addition to the new case managers, Pack enlisted the services of [Airtable](#), which handles much of the necessary data input. And [Equity Institute](#), which serves underserved populations in order to ensure equitable access to services and the prevention of homelessness, is part of the process, working with applicants who require language translation.

The Centralia Corps also endeavors to help those without internet access in need of rental assistance, especially people in east Lewis County where [internet](#) availability is patchy. Once a month, the corps assistant, Carrie Olsen, takes The Salvation Army’s bus to the farther reaches of the county to help process applications there.

The corps’ efforts, and the Packs’ leadership, has not gone unnoticed.

“[The Packs] moved to Centralia in 2018 and were operating on a shoestring budget,” said Susan Tiffany, Social Services Director for The Salvation Army’s Northwest Division. “They worked closely with the county and the city to build a relationship that has resulted in exponential growth of their programs and budget.”

The local government knows The Salvation Army will handle the new funding appropriately, “doing the most good.”

“For a small corps they are doing mighty things,” Tiffany said. “The Packs epitomize what it means to be the hands and feet of Jesus. Their faith that he will provide has allowed them to serve freely with love and compassion and God has greatly honored their trust and faithfulness.”

The community has responded to the corps in gratitude for its efforts. Pack said it’s important to keep in mind that some landlords are not big corporations but individuals who depend on the income from their rental properties. One such landlady came to the corps to say “thank you,” bringing gift baskets for all the staff. The corps receives thank-you cards almost weekly from people who have received assistance.

Fortunately, the grants are flexible regarding what is considered a rental expense, such as hotel costs. One woman seeking help was \$3,500 behind on her hotel bill. She was working, but 85 percent of her income was going to staying housed. The Salvation Army was able to secure funds for three and a half months of back rent.

The woman was ecstatic. “She was just trying to catch up,” Pack said. “She came in thinking she would get maybe a couple hundred dollars.”

The Packs are known throughout the area.

“We are in our uniforms a lot,” Pack said. “People will recognize us and ask questions about the program. We will have them come in and get them situated, and they are really surprised. It’s been a great way to connect with the community.”

Pack emphasized the importance of keeping people in their homes.

“We are able to recognize some big barriers to housing in Lewis County,” she said. “If we can keep people housed, that’s much more effective than getting people out of homelessness.”

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