

Human services student makes difference at Emergency Shelter through internship

by Matt Hietpas - Wednesday, November 28, 2012

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Homelessness is an issue that is not always at the forefront of everyone's mind. But for University of Wisconsin Oshkosh student Stephanie Birchfield, helping the homeless has become her mission.

Birchfield is senior studying human services who is interning at the Emergency Shelter of the Fox Valley, a nonprofit organization in Appleton with the goal of "providing temporary shelter to homeless individuals and families in a safe environment, while providing guidance to those both homeless and at-risk that promotes independence," according to their mission.

"Just to hear some of the client's stories and what they have been through and how easily people have slid into poverty around here is just crazy," Birchfield said.

The Emergency Shelter of the Fox Valley provides services to people of all ages and sexes in need and can house up to 75 residents.

Recently, Birchfield was given the opportunity to ride along with a street outreach case manager to see a different side of the city. Case managers work with residents to manage their cases and coordinate services to help in-crisis individuals move to more stable situations.

"He took me underneath some of the bridges in Appleton and to some of the hotspots for homelessness," she said. "It was really eye-opening."

Birchfield said the experiences at the emergency shelter have changed her outlook on what she wants to do in the future.

"I would actually like to work more in case management. It's more individually focused," Birchfield said. "They build a plan for them to become more independent and to get jobs and housing. They are the ones connecting our residents with the resources they need."

While opening its doors to the community to help people from throughout Outagamie, Winnebago and other counties in the state, the emergency shelter has also given Birchfield the chance to interact with a number of its occupants. Early in her internship, she conducted surveys to get feedback on what its residents think of the shelter.

"They are all in very difficult situations. They are all in this homeless shelter, some of them were so grateful they just wanted to talk the shelter up and some of them are having issues," she said. "It's definitely helped me learn about interpersonal skills because I've never really worked with that client group before."

Another project through her internship has Birchfield researching breathalyzers to be used by the shelter. The Emergency Shelter of the Fox Valley is a drug- and alcohol-free environment with a zero-tolerance policy. If someone is suspected of having alcohol or drugs in their system the shelter sends the resident to the Appleton Police Department to get tested. Birchfield is in the process of finding the necessary financial options in order to purchase a breathalyzer to help the shelter.

Birchfield started college studying education at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point before transferring to UW Oshkosh and switching her major to human services last year.

“I (originally) went into education because I really wanted to work with kids. Then, I took a class and I realized this isn’t for me, I’m not meant to teach,” she said. “I really wanted to work with kids and do something where I was helping them. That’s why I chose human services.”

The introductory human services class gave Birchfield the chance to do field experience at the Oshkosh Area Community Pantry, said Annette Larie, human service leadership field experience director at UW Oshkosh.

“She was an excellent student and received a very supportive evaluation for the Oshkosh Area Community Pantry where she completed a 30 [hour] exploratory experience,” said Larie. “Most helpful to them was Stephanie's ability to jump right in and do whatever was needed at anytime.”

According to Birchfield, the field experience consisted of stocking shelves and other manual labor but it also gave her the chance to talk to the people who depend on the pantry.

“I totally wouldn’t have imagined being at the emergency shelter to be honest,” she said. “Then, I did this 30 hour field experience and I was like, ‘this is something I really want to learn about.’”

Learn more:

- [College of Education and Human Services](#)
- [Emergency Shelter of the Fox Valley](#)
- [Oshkosh Area Community Pantry](#)