

Safe Harbor homeless shelter quickly reaches near-maximum capacity

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Kerren J. Sanders, 62, said she had to leave the Pinellas Safe Harbor because the new shelter needed room for people in an upcoming jail-diversion program.

CLEARWATER — A month after [Pinellas Safe Harbor](#) opened its doors to homeless residents, city and county officials consider the program a great success. Perhaps a little too much of a success.

The shelter facility near the county jail, designed to house homeless offenders whose crimes are minor and nonviolent, quickly filled to near capacity. With about 300 spots in what will eventually be a 500-bed shelter, Safe Harbor peaked around 290 last week.

And those are all volunteers, according to Rhonda Abbott, St. Petersburg's homeless services director. The shelter hasn't started its diversion program to relieve the jail of overcrowding.

The shelter has had to remove some people who didn't fit its intended profile, part of an ongoing learning curve as Pinellas County and the city seek to relieve a growing homeless problem.

"This isn't designed to be a repository for predators and offenders that just don't have a place," said Pinellas County sheriff's Chief Deputy Robert Gualtieri.

Two such people were forced to leave in January. Others were removed because they were so inebriated they needed special treatment, Gualtieri said.

More surprisingly, evicted renters or mobile home residents recently started showing up and using Safe Harbor as their permanent address on records.

One 62-year-old woman said she was stunned when she was told she had 24 hours to leave Safe Harbor, yet her 35-year-old son with a criminal record was allowed to stay.

Kerren J. Sanders and her son, Nathan, were evicted from her mobile home in January, just as the shelter was opening. She and her son were admitted and Sanders became the "den mother" for the women, she said.

"It was an ideal situation," said Sanders, who was laid off in 2009 from her job as a credit counselor. But when she began trying to treat residents for injuries and illnesses, she tangled with the shelter staff, which told her she couldn't act as a nurse. Sanders is a trained medical assistant and wanted to apply for a staff or volunteer medical assistant job at Safe Harbor. She was told there was no position for her.

Last week, Sanders contacted the *St. Petersburg Times* after she was told to leave Safe Harbor by Friday morning. She was offered a spot at Pinellas Hope, but said she didn't want to sleep in a tent. She also didn't want to go anywhere without her son.

She said the staff told her that her son could stay because he was a felon, but she had to go to make room for homeless jail inmates as the shelter launches its jail diversion program.

"I understand they're getting federal grant money for this," Sanders said. "But where are the grants for senior citizens with no criminal background?"

Gualtieri said Sanders wasn't turned away to make room for criminals but because they felt there were places better suited for a first-time homeless woman who has a car.

"She's not in the target population," he said. "It's to the point where it is not a hotel. It's been a couple weeks."

The shelter's success was no surprise to those who work closely with the homeless. Pinellas Hope, which opened three years ago and houses 200 to 300, has a waiting list, despite being selective. Drinking and drugs aren't allowed for residents of the outdoor shelter, dubbed "Tent City," and it has strict curfews.

Safe Harbor was promoted as a more flexible place for homeless people, allowing them to arrive drunk and come and go more freely than other shelters. Ultimately, the shelter intends to open to homeless people released from jail or the Corrections Department, and people accused of minor crimes such as public urination or shoplifting and ordinarily would be taken to jail.

At the end of this week, the shelter will take a handful of test cases before it expands to begin the jail diversion program this month, Gualtieri said.

The sheriff and county are awaiting Justice Department approval to spend a \$500,000 grant on the diversion program, said Tim Burns, Pinellas County's director of consumer and justice services.

The federal agency has to issue "special conditions" on the grant to Pinellas and other communities before the shelter starts taking in homeless people cited for violations such as open containers, trespass or public intoxication. It was unclear what those conditions would be.

St. Petersburg Mayor [Bill Foster](#) has said the city will eventually begin arresting homeless people who sleep in parks or on public rights of way, with Safe Harbor an eventual destination for them.

But right now, Abbott said, the city is just focused on housing the many people who choose to go and working out any problems that arise with keeping them there.

"Every day, we're tweaking," she said. "But overall, I'd say we're all really pleased with how this has gone."

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