

This is KPTZ FM 91.9 in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Nhatt Nichols, bringing you news and commentary from the Jefferson County *Beacon* for Wednesday, February 19, 2025.

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Homelessness has always been a difficult and expensive social issue to solve. For most, chronic homelessness starts at age 14, and yet, older single women on Social Security are now the main demographic nationwide. Jefferson is the oldest county in Washington, making us a high-risk community. There has been an 18% yearly increase in homelessness, according to a recent federal report (<https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2024-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>). In other words, homelessness is a huge, multifaceted problem for Jefferson County residents.

As part of their harm reduction budget, Jefferson County commissioners allocated \$4,000 from the Jefferson Health Department for laundry vouchers, with no certainty more will be allocated later in the year. Each voucher is good for two loads of laundry, which costs an average of \$10 per load at Mom's Laundromat. By mid-January, there were no vouchers left.

While the budget running out of money for the voucher program is a deep concern, the pressure for unsheltered people to meet basic needs has increased with additional public services closing. From the outlets on the side of the Cotton building being shut off to the closing of the showers at Fort Warden, the port, and the fairground, unhoused people have nowhere to easily charge devices or bathe. The Winter Welcoming center offers YMCA shower vouchers, but because of children present at the facilities, ID and background checks are required, which many unsheltered people do not have or feel comfortable undergoing.

As for laundry, Bayside Towers in Irondale and the American Legion shelter do not have facilities, and Dove House, a shelter for domestic violence, sexual assault, and crime victims, offers laundry to its clients only. Without laundromats, vouchers, or showers, clothing becomes disposable, and local encampments are littered with wet clothing.

Community resources beyond money are essential, and the Winter Welcoming Center needs underwear, toothpaste, sleeping bags, tents, hand warmers, and food. Beyond donations of money and physical items, time and effort volunteering or attending Shelter Coalition meetings at the Recovery Cafe is a sincerely meaningful way to support the unhoused. The Welcoming Center is also looking for a team of 3-5 volunteers and one person to help organize.

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Today, the Port Townsend Food Co-op employees vote on joining Local 3000 of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) International Union. This opportunity comes after months of difficulty between the board, the general manager, and the employees. General Manager Kenna Eaton publicly expressed her personal feelings at a February 5 board meeting that a union would not be the best fit for co-op employees, an opinion she reiterated in an email: "My own opinion is that unions do a lot of good for a lot of people. However, UFCW is a massive organization with nearly 50,000 members in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. It represents employees at companies like Safeway, Fred Meyer, Rite-Aid, QFC, and many more. I don't think the big companies like that have much in common with our Food Co-op and our employees. Our workplace, our store and our members are unique, and I think that we can be creative in finding solutions that fit us and our challenges."

One way in which it is unique is that it has a disproportionate number of major workplace injuries. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, grocery stores in 2023 had an average of 1.6 cases of a workplace-related injury

causing at least one day away from work per 100 employees. The Port Townsend Food Co-op, which in 2023 had 107 employees, had a total of three cases, according to their OSHA 300a report. That's nearly twice the national average. Although the national numbers are not available for 2024, the co-op had eight incidents that required an employee to take time off work, five times the 2023 national average. No matter the result of today's vote, the increased open communication is a positive development that should contribute to improved conditions for all parties involved.

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