

# THE SUN

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## Lowell shelter feeds dozens of homeless on Thanksgiving

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Lowell Transitional Living Center executive director Andy McMahon poses with a plate of food prepped for local homeless Thursday afternoon.

LOWELL — Lowell Transitional Living Center Executive Director Andy McMahon plops down on his office chair and breathes heavily.

It's Thanksgiving Day and McMahon, along with his staff, are feeding close to 50 homeless people a Thanksgiving dinner during a brisk, damp Thursday afternoon.

Local volunteers, some of whom can't be named due to HIPAA laws, McMahon says, put roasted turkey, mashed potatoes, squash and dinner rolls on plates and hand them out to some

people sitting alone on long tables filled with Thanksgiving decor. Most of the food, McMahon says, was prepped by community kitchen manager James Larkin, who wasn't there Thursday.

For these diners, there are no comfy, two-story homes or lavish feasts to eat with family.

There are plastic utensils, cots and "tough living" — small living spaces and beat-up, cracked walls.

McMahon says he is just trying to give people — many just down on their luck and trying to get back on their feet after dealing with difficult situations (substance abuse; lack of affordable housing; medical debt) — a safe place to stay during hard times.

"It's important to try and make this place a pretty good place for the holidays," says McMahon, who has served in his role for 14 months after working at Daybreak Shelter in Lawrence for nine years. "This time of year can be hard for everyone, but we try and make it a good day."

Yaritza Scarpatte, who helps manage the dorms and a variety of roles at the center, says she knows most of those who walk into the shelter Thursday.

Scarpatte, a Lowell native, says she previously worked at a local Dunkin' Donuts and gave out coffee and a doughnuts to some just looking for shelter during the winter months.

A local Thanksgiving table set up at the Lowell Transitional Living Center Thursday. (SUN/ Luke O'Roark) Now, she smiles at those who walk in — writing down names and getting people comfortable as they nap on a nearby wall or watch the NFL Thanksgiving Day football games on a medium-sized television screen mantled at the center of the community space.

"It's not that hard to help someone," says Scarpatte, who is nicknamed "mom" by some at the shelter. "We try to lighten the spirit today so people can still feel like they're around family."

McMahon says he's expecting close to anywhere from 140 to 200 beds to be filled as the winter months come. He says most who come in are "looking for a little help" and are living day-by-day — many victims of domestic abuse or have mental health issues.

"We try to be fair and understanding with people," McMahon says. "You don't know what happened before they walked (through) that door."

One volunteer inside the kitchen Thursday, named Dale, quickly makes a plate of food as another local man praises Dale's quick efficiency while he slabs mashed potatoes, cranberries and sweet potatoes on to a fiber plate.

"He needs a damn raise, man," the local man says about Dale.

McMahon smiles.

“When you stop and think about it, there is no one that is immune from problems these folk have faced,” McMahon says in the middle of the living center, greeting some of the locals who’ve been there for a few hours.

“They’re human. They’re not bad people. They have real emotions just like you and me,” he adds.

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