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ALERT

CENTERPIECE

Meeting the homeless where they're at

By Shar Porier shar.porier@myheraldreview.com

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Lu Funk is the executive director of Cochise Harm Reduction. Funk stands in the organization's new warehouse facility in Bisbee.

MARK LEVY HERALD/REVIEW

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Editor's Note: This is the second in a series of stories on the homeless population in Cochise County and those who help them.

BISBEE — It all started with two things — a shoestring budget and heart. Now it's known as an established welcome and needed resource for the homeless in Cochise County.

Lu Funk, 31, who identifies as they and them, knows what it is like to be an addict on the streets with no place to call home. Their drug use began with opiates at a young age.

They have been clean and sober for more than 10 years and served the required community service hours from a drug sentence in harm reduction programs. That experience led them to start a syringe exchange service project in 2019 in Bisbee before Arizona officially legalized the practice. They did it using their own money.

“After my service hours were done, I wasn’t going to just walk away after seeing the need. I was from this world,” they said. “I had no idea it was going to go like this. But, that speaks to the need. I decided to throw all my eggs in the basket and begin. I could see the need and see the impact a comprehensive program in the county would have.”

They applied for and received nonprofit status under the name Cochise Harm Reduction, which opened doors to grants to help fund her program.

Alicia Thompson, then director of Cochise Health and Social Services, heard about the work Funk was doing. Thompson was familiar with needle exchange efforts while in Washington state and wanted to bring a mobile needle exchange program to Cochise County. Seeing the success of Funk’s program, she wanted to support it.

Thompson noted the people that needed the help would probably not come to the county health department. Since Funk had already earned the trust of those in need, she wanted to work with them and CHR to handle a countywide exchange in 2022.

“Back when the law to legalize syringe exchange services in Arizona was being voted on, I was holding my breath and praying the bill would pass,” Thompson said.

That was in 2021, and it was a long, four-year battle with the state Legislature before the bill was finally passed.

“When syringe exchange programs are available in a community, it offers intravenous drug users the opportunity to take responsibility for their health by exchanging dirty used needles for clean ones, thereby, reducing their risk of disease,” Thompson said. “Syringe exchange is a successful harm-reduction intervention.”



Executive Director of Cochise Harm Reduction Lu Funk prepares to give food supplies to a person in need last week in Sierra Vista.

MARK LEVY HERALD/REVIEW

Clean needles are “extremely effective” as they reduce the spread of multiple communicable diseases, including HIV, she said. And, clean needles reduce the incidence of infections at the injection site which can often turn into “very ugly and dangerous wounds.”

The county received funding to reduce impact of substance use in Cochise County and Thompson had planned to use these funds to start a syringe exchange program.

That’s when she met Lu Funk.

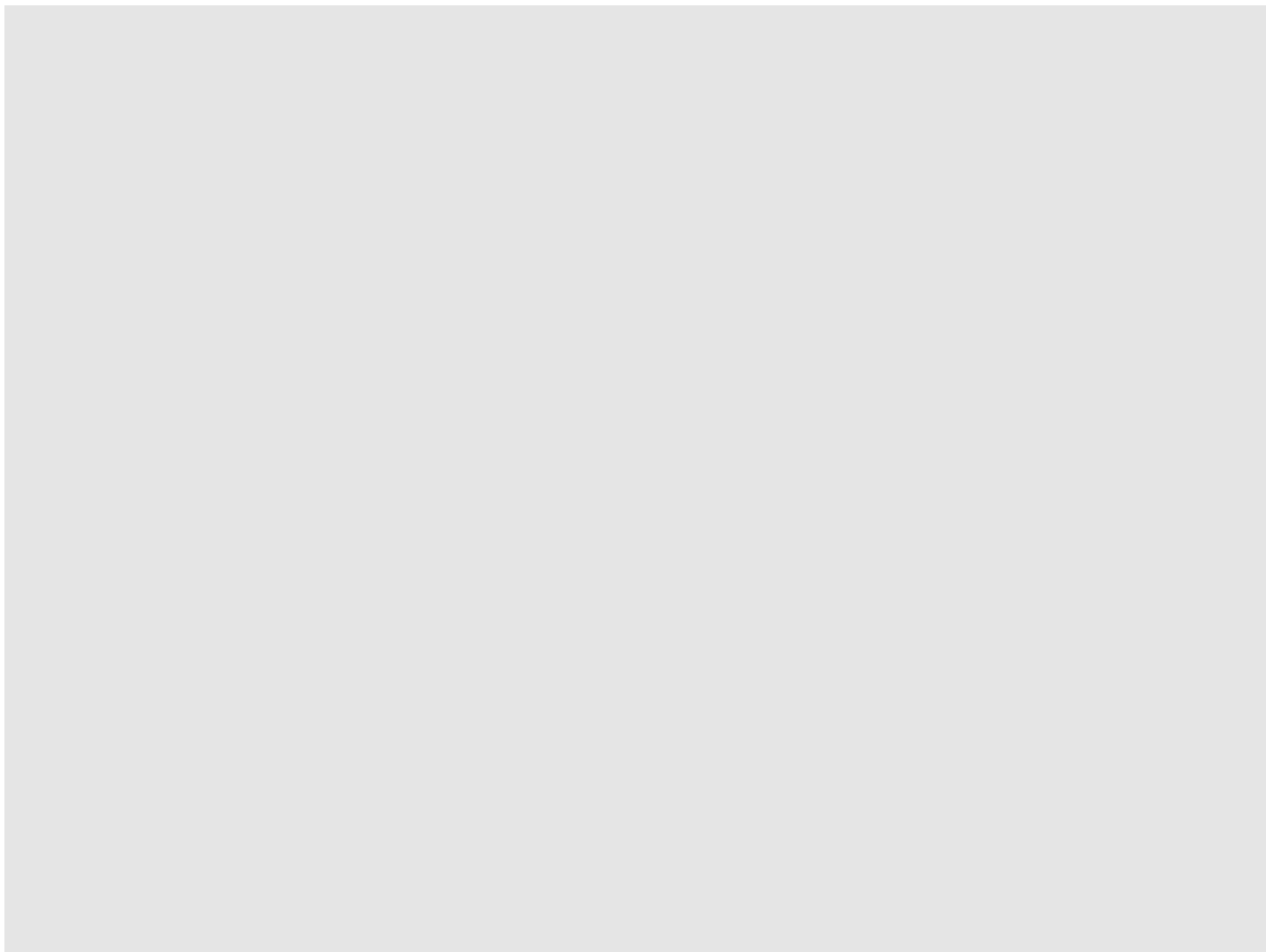
“Lu had already been working with the drug-using population and was prepared to go full-on with a syringe exchange program,” Thompson said. “All they needed was funding. We immediately began working on passing through our funds directly to Cochise Harm Reduction. This unrestricted annual funding has allowed CHR to flourish.”

Funk began the effort in Bisbee, but is reaching out to those in Sierra Vista, Benson and Douglas. They would like to expand into Willcox, but they do not have the staff or funding. They hopes to accomplish that next year.

CHR is a poster child for others interested in helping the homeless meet their needs with naloxone, needles, first-aid kits, socks, tents, tarps, sleeping bags, feminine hygiene products, male and female condoms, even small, replacement propane tanks for cooking and heating. Thanks to the state commodities program, Funk can provide them with nonperishable food and perishable food if refrigeration is onsite.

The reasons the program has been so successful is because it is mobile and can go anywhere in the county, Funk said. The homeless often have no transportation to the fixed-site providers.

“We have a mobile unit that visits people every week,” Funk said. “We built these consistent routes so people know when we’ll be there.”



Cochise Harm Reduction employee Sam Bernard, right, and Executive Director Lu Funk receive new items to be stocked in the organization's warehouse last week.

PHOTOS by MARK LEVY HERALD/REVIEW

Another part of the success story is Funk only hires people who have lived through the experience of drug addiction and homelessness.

"Everyone who works here has some connection to them," Funk added. "That helps build trust and rapport in the places that we go and in our standing. We're offering basically peer support. The system is really difficult to navigate. You can't just Google it. You need someone to be an advocate for you."

The success of CHR has led Funk and team to a new office, five times as big as the former location in Saginaw, on Naco Highway.

Some of the homeless are people who are released from jail and have no transportation to get back to wherever home is, Funk said.

"While some find ways to get back home to other parts of the county — Tucson and Phoenix — others have stayed here in Bisbee," Funk said. "Especially if they are from somewhere else and realize Bisbee is a better place to be homeless."

In Sierra Vista, Funk visits the homeless encampments once a week to help care for them. In addition to the food and supplies CHR provides, the teams also ask about their health, just in case.

It is most hard on the senior citizens who find themselves in situations they never thought they would experience, Funk said. For those on a very limited income, rent hikes have pushed them out on the streets.

"There was a 70-year-old man whose landlord jacked up the rent. All he could do was to go out in the desert," Funk said.

He became ill and Funk was trying to help him as much as possible. But with the camps moving every two days, it took them three weeks to finally get word the man had passed away. It was a difficult pill for them to swallow.

Funk believes he could have been helped, even hospitalized, if he had not disappeared into the maze of camps scattered around Sierra Vista.

Funk has a partner in her efforts with Sonoran Prevention Works, a nonprofit committed to helping prevent disease through the needle exchange program. The core of the program supports people through overdose education, naloxone and testing for HIV and hepatitis C.

Samantha Childs, who works for SPW, is also a board member of CHR, and now accompanies Funk on the trips to Sierra Vista and helps locate the camps and individuals who need help. Their route in Sierra Vista takes about five and a half hours to complete.

It is easy to tell who needs the help, as some cycle around Sierra Vista with all their gear in tow, or pound the pavement on foot with all they can carry on their backs. The lucky ones have wagons and carts.

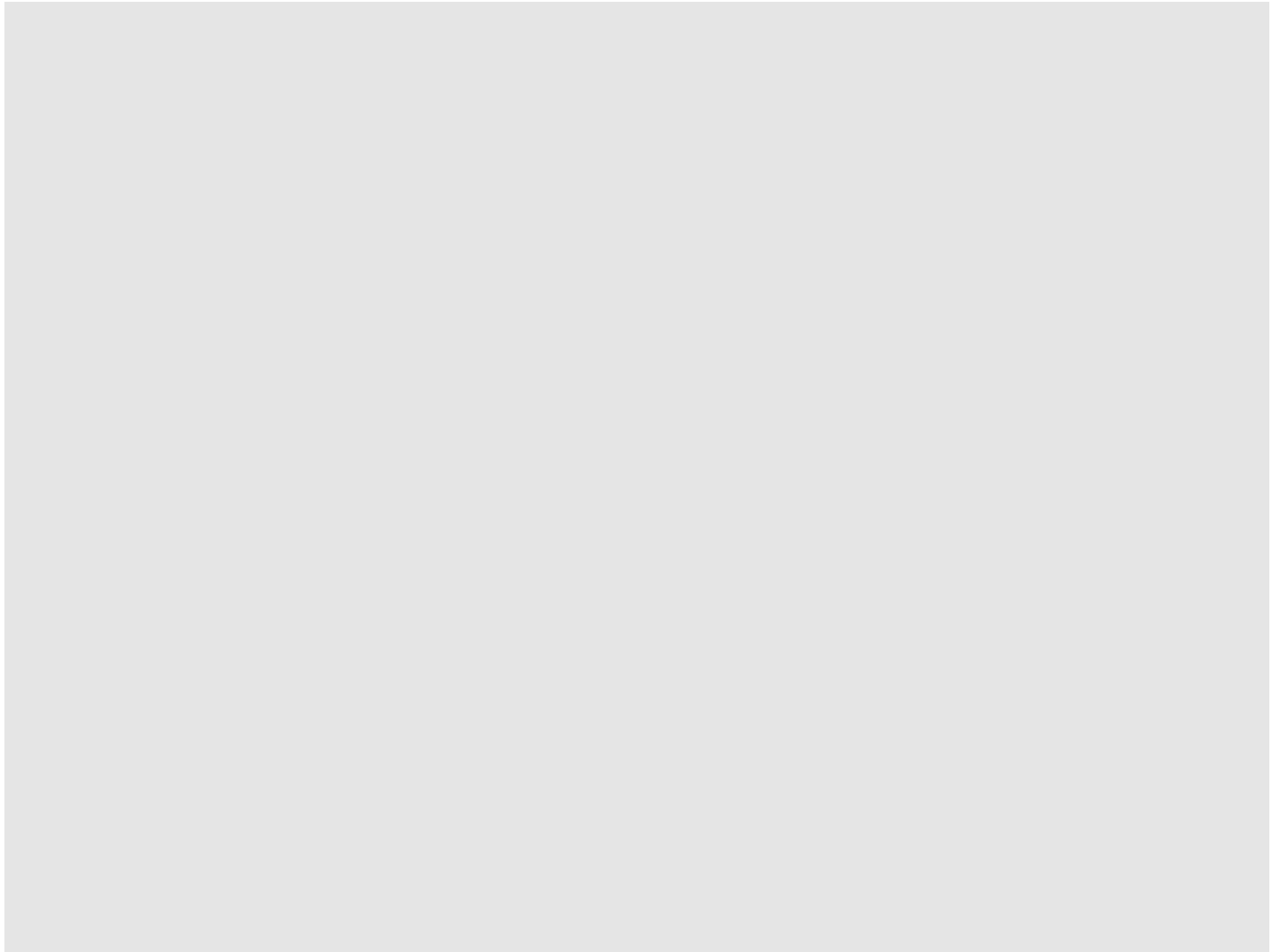
"I have to pack up everything and carry it with me to go shopping, go to the doctor or people will steal what they can," one homeless woman told the Herald/Review.

Speaking anonymously out of concern for her own safety, the woman claimed she was regularly harassed by the Sierra Vista Police Department, a common complaint among the homeless in the area.

Officers clear the homeless camps every two days, per city ordinance, adding an additional burden as they recover from the loss of their belongings. They are forced out into the desert to avoid contact with law enforcement, the woman said.

Sierra Vista buses are free to use, but they cannot take all their belongs or their pets with them. For some of the homeless, pets serve as watchdogs and support dogs. They fill lonely hours as companions. To keep the pets healthy, Funk also provides small bags of dog food.

Mariann and Carl were sitting in the shade in the parking lot at Safeway with their signs asking for help. They moved from Indiana to Sierra Vista to be near her sister as well as escape the cold winters in Indiana. Both are disabled and struggling financially. Marianne is on disability, while Carl is waiting to hear about his disability request.



Lu Funk, Cochise HARM Reduction executive director, gives supplies to Sierra Vista couple Marianne and Carl recently.

PHOTOS by MARK LEVY HERALD/REVIEW

“This is really nice assistance you do for us,” said Carl as he learned they could get help if they do end up out on the street.

With the federal Emergency Rental Assistance program coming to an end on Oct. 13, they do not know if they will be able to keep a roof over their heads as they are on a Housing and Urban Development waiting list.

However, there is a new rental assistance program for households with children and for seniors that begins on Oct. 15 through the Arizona Department of Economic Security. The state program will come in handy for those who manage to hang on thanks to rental assistance.

Robert Rose, who is disabled and has mental health issues, lives in the Blue Horizon Apartments, which is undergoing renovations. He has a place to call home, but providing for himself is difficult. So, Funk and Childs loaded him up with a sack lunch, compliments of Healthy Bisbee, which provides food for the homeless in Bisbee through Goar Park Lunches, and added food he can make at home.

An elderly woman in a walker who also lives at Blue Horizon came out for her lunch and weekly supplies, was also appreciative of the assistance.

A group of young people was spotted at the CVS and a stop was made to give them a lunch, water, sleeping bags and other supplies.

Shayla was one of the group. She lost her rental home and for the past three or four weeks she has been living in a tent and relying on the various nonprofits for support. She is self-employed and looks for housekeeping and landscaping work, but she has no phone to make contact with potential customers.

The frozen apricot treats and new socks went over well with the group of four on a hot afternoon. They also received information on the help CHR offers and when to expect deliveries. They have been camping on Bureau of Land Management land where the city cannot evict them.

As a nonprofit, CHR accepts donations from retailers, groups and individuals to help fill the gaps in funding and allow Funk to reach more people more often.

More Information

Cochise Harm Reduction

520-485-9698

1556 So. Naco Highway

Website: <https://cochiseharmreduction.org/>

Arizona Department of Economic Security

Households that need utility assistance may be eligible for the Low Income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP) and Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). You can apply for these benefits at the Housing Stability and Utility Assistance Portal.

DES to start new rental assistance program for households with children and seniors to begin Oct. 15. To receive updates about the program, please monitor the webpage and the Housing Stability and Utility Assistance Portal.

<https://des.az.gov/ERAP>

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Bisbee/County Reporter