

Mercy Seat shelter involved in drug raid

by Tom Cowan
Staff Writer

Mercy Seat, the county's only homeless shelter, plans to reopen next week. A police drug raid led to the closing of the shelter and the arrest of its director nearly two months ago.

According to the Michael Collins, the interim director of Mercy Seat, police suspected a woman staying in the shelter of selling marijuana. On Aug. 31 police conducted a raid of the building, which resulted in three arrests, including the arrest of Michael Collins the founder and director of the shelter. The shelter has been closed since the raid, but board members plan to reopen it next week after investigations and needed repairs are completed.

Located down town at 107 Duckworth Street, Mercy Seat is Transylvania County's transitional housing agency for women and children. It was founded in 1999 by Michael Lance, a local minister who started the shelter with the main purpose of assisting the evicted families of prisoners. With some exceptions the shelter only houses women and children. Mercy Seat originally had a house for men as well but it was closed due to lack of funding. Today

Mercy Seat has eight beds and is the only homeless shelter in the county.

While Lance was in the building on Aug. 31, police broke down a front and back door. According to Collins, Police searched every inside the building and found one woman in possession of marijuana and paraphernalia. The woman's sister and Lance who were in the room with her at the time of the raid were also arrested. Lance is currently charged with a felony possession of marijuana. Lance has since passed a drug test and the other two women who were arrested say that he had no knowledge of their marijuana. A probable cause hearing will be held for Lance on Oct. 25. Lance's lawyer Mack McKeller says "we hotly contest the charge" and the case is likely to go to trial. Both McKeller and police have declined to discuss any details of the case since all charges are still pending.

Two other women in the shelter at the time of the raid were served warrants for a meth lab discovered by police at the Pine Crest public housing facility. Collins explained that the shelter's designed drug policy was to drug test anyone needing to stay at the shelter for more than one night. If a person tests positively they will usu-

ally be allowed to continue to stay in the shelter if and until their next test shows that they have stopped using drugs. Due to the apparent failure of this policy Lance's removal as director is likely to be permanent regardless of whether or not his charges are dropped. Who will take Lances place is not yet known.

Collins said "the reason it is taking so long for the shelter to reopen is because a lot of things have had to be done by the books." Collins described a series of auditing and investigating which is being done in order to regain funding from organizations such as FEMA, and the United Way. It is still unclear weather or not this funding will be fully restored.

Members of board at Mercy Seat have been using the last two months as time to make needed repairs and improvements on the house. Several businesses and church groups have answered the call for donations such as Jennings Builder Supply who has repaired the house's two broken doors and the local Quaker community who donated a new shower. While there is still a fair amount of work to do, Collins says the shelter should reopen next week.

Injury

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Some of Zhoa's hospital visitors say that she is fully coherent and in good spirits though in pain. Zhoa's visitors say that she is not paralyzed though she is unable to walk or fully sit up. Dean Susan Yowell has indicated that Zhoa is expected to make a full recovery and return to campus soon.

Yowell said since the incident a light has been put out near the window well near where Zhoa fell. She also said that the company that handles campus maintenance, Sidexo, is looking for a way to prevent this from happening again.

Fitness

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tant to create a campus environment that attracts and retains high-caliber students, faculty and staff. That's why we work tirelessly to improve our residential and academic facilities. Increasing our offerings of health and wellness opportunities for the members of our campus community is essential to that effort."

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