

Allied Churches shelter struggling to provide as community need increases, resources not keeping pace

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demand for services is increasing faster than any of us are prepared for," Thompson said. "We're being strategic about what we can accomplish and what we can't. The reality is that we can't be all things to all people. It's just not possible."

Perceptions of Need

According to Thompson, there is a common perception that homeless individuals aren't trying and if they work just a bit harder, they could "pull themselves up by their bootstraps."

"The reality is that I have people with master's degrees in my shelter who are homeless due to personal crises, the economic downturn or health issues," he said. "We forget that a large percentage of the population are just a few paychecks away from being homeless. We live in an artificial bubble that nothing is going to happen to us."

Often, Thompson said, bad things happen to good people and they find themselves, through no fault of their own, being homeless.

"Once that happens, they experience a lot of sadness, depression and shame and when they come here, it is our job to help give them some dignity, help empower them so they can rebuild their lives," he said.

The homeless shelter is not just a place to house people temporarily. Rather, the goals include to providing a sanctuary and a place for personal transformation for those who want to reclaim their



HEATHER CASSANO | Photo Editor
Allied Churches is located about 10 minutes from Elon University's campus.

lives.

"We want to do everything in our power to make that happen," Thompson said.

The public perception of homelessness often differs from the reality of the issue, another thing the shelter is trying to overcome. Because there are few homeless people standing on the street with signs, there is a skewed perception.

"The reality is that it's illegal and they'll be arrested, there are ordinances against that," Thompson said. "They become invisible. You don't see them like you might in other countries so people don't think they're here."

Furthermore, there is a large number of homeless

people who have not sought services from shelters such as Allied Churches.

"We compare the number we serve with the number of children reported in schools and it's 10 times higher," he said.

The situation in Alamance County is much worse than what they are dealing with at the shelter, he said.

"We have to stop blaming the victim and thinking they have done something wrong and it's their own fault, that they've managed their money poorly, got addicted to drugs, couldn't keep a job or made bad choices," he said. "The reality is we all make bad choices from time to time and for most of us it won't lead to homelessness. I try to tell people more than anything to have some mercy and some compassion and give your fellow citizens some grace."

"The people who are here need grace, they don't need judgment because if we are ever going to help them move out of homelessness, we are never going to do that by shaming them or condemning them."

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Assault response of campuses nationwide scrutinized

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don't think I could ever get over it if I didn't try everything I could to make sure he has to pay for what he did," Newbridge said. However, resolution did not come.

"The day after the verdict, I decided that I wanted to transfer," she said.

An underreported issue

University approach and response to sexual assault on campuses nationwide has come under scrutiny in recent months, and the challenges faced by universities and victims have been revealed through discussions about the way administrators should respond.

According to a national study funded by the Department of Justice, one in five women will experience an incident of sexual assault during their time in college. However, the same study indicates that more than 95 percent of college students who are sexually assaulted do not report to campus police or officials, an issue at Elon.

According to Leigh-Anne Royster, coordinator of personal health programs and community well being, the biggest reason for this is fear.

"In an instance of sexual violence you've just had all your power and control taken away from you," she said. "What are the chances you want to put that power into someone else's hands again?"

Instead of speaking with administrators, Blankson told the fraternity president.

"I tried to keep it so that this kid didn't get in trouble with the campus, because I didn't want my name out there," she said.

The fear of what others think is another reason victims tend to stay silent, according to Royster.

"People do a lot of victim blaming," she said.

A range of Americans said that victims of sexual assault are sometimes responsible for the act, particularly when dressed "provocatively" or when in "dangerous places," like bars and "bad neighborhoods," according to a 2010 FrameWorks Research Report.

According to Vicki Moehlman, captain in the Elon University Campus Safety and Police, victims tend to buy in to these beliefs.

"A lot of girls here seem to think it's their fault and that they brought it upon themselves, and that's totally not the truth," she said.

This kind of stigma leaves students feeling as though they cannot disclose the details of their experience, Royster said. The fraternity president's response to Blankson's story was unexpected, Blankson said.

"He said that he was sorry that it happened but that he wasn't going to do anything because it wasn't a big deal," Blankson said. "He just said 'you're lucky

that you didn't get raped.'"

Blankson simply accepted that statement.

Fear of judicial action

The Elon office of Judicial Affairs is responsible for handling any situations related to Elon's Honor Code and it is there that students have the opportunity to present cases of sexual violence.

However, just as students do not want to report incidents of sexual assault, they also tend to decide not to pursue a Judicial Affairs hearing, Royster said, with a mere 16 percent of students coming into her office deciding to pursue Judicial Affairs action.

For victims, there are many reasons to avoid judicial action.

"I wanted him to feel bad for it and for him to know he really scarred me, but I also just wanted it to be done," Blankson said. "I didn't want to think about it anymore. I knew by going through judicial I'd have to tell my story a hundred times."

Royster said these fears are common.

"They fear telling the story again to multiple people. They fear going through the process and the person not being found responsible," she said. "I think all of those things are legitimate."

Jodean Schmiederer, associate dean of students for Judicial Affairs, agrees.

"A lot of times you want consequences to happen to that person, but it's difficult understandably to have to step forward and talk about it," she said.

Newbridge was worried about these issues, but she decided going through the process was a necessary step towards healing.

"I tend to analyze every event in my life, and I knew that I would never find closure without confronting my aggressor," she said.

Universities in the hot seat

The Elon judicial system determines whether a student is responsible through a "more likely than not" procedure. "Our conduct process for all cases is based on the status of a preponderance of evidence," Schmiederer said. "It's really just if it's more likely than not that it happened."

This type of system has come under scrutiny in recent months. A recent CBS News article highlighted a case in California in which a student, who was drinking at a party, said she was sexually assaulted, and is suing the university for

violating her human rights. The student said the judicial board's questions seemed to focus on her conduct that night more than anything else.

According to Schmiederer, the behavior of a potential victim is a focus during a hearing, particularly when alcohol is involved. "If a person is too intoxicated to be able to give consent and sexual activity occurs, then it is sexual assault," she said. "How do you determine how intoxicated is too intoxicated to give consent?"

If a student has been drinking, it is up to the judicial affairs hearing officer to decide if the accused student was aware of the intoxication.

The officers have to determine if there were any indication or any reason for them to know that the student was intoxicated, Schmiederer said. To do so, details are key. "We try to talk to as many witnesses as possible," she said. "We look at details and discrepancies in details."

For Newbridge, this was an issue. The hearing took place weeks after the incident occurred, and details such as the color of the cups the location of the incident were lost due to the passage of time.

"I just feel like because I wasn't taken seriously because I couldn't remember a lot of things," she said.

What should universities do?

The campus policies surrounding sexual assault have been called into question in recent months, and this April, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights released a "Dear Colleague" letter, which addresses how universities should respond to incidents.

Several universities, including Stanford and the Universities of Georgia and Oklahoma, have already responded to the letter, publicly stating that changes to the way they conduct sexual assault investigations and cases are in the near future.

The letter will impact Elon policies that will be discussed during the summer planning months. Royster said she believes changes are necessary. "I don't know that the judicial policy as it currently reads fully reflects a policy of accountability on our students," she said.

Royster said she hopes a policy that requires proof of consent is established.

"Not knowing that someone was drunk or not being sure is not an excuse," she said. "I think currently students can say 'I couldn't have known,' and that can be

grounds to find them not responsible."

The office of Judicial Affairs hopes to provide post-decision support for both parties involved and utilize student members of Elon's honor board to serve as resources for students going through the process, Schmiederer said.

In order to combat the number of campus incidents, Royster said improvement to education and awareness is necessary. She hopes to create a hotline with a number students can call at all times.

"I'm also working on building a more comprehensive website," she said, hoping to include the use of social media in order to reach students.

Starting to move on

It has been more than a year, and Blankson said she feels she has moved on.

"Now, I'm a little bit better about it, but it was really hard to see him on campus and living a normal life, carefree about the whole thing," she said.

Although she now says telling someone may have been beneficial, she has been able to come to some resolution on her own. "I've gone through that night 100 times in my mind," she said. "I realized that wasn't my fault, and it was a really hard thing to get over."

Newbridge has been home for several weeks now and made her decision to transfer from Elon the day of the judicial decision. Her time is spent swimming and with her family, a support system she said she couldn't have survived without.

But, it's been hard.

"Now, I'm more sad about it than angry," Newbridge said. "I have nightmares all the time."

She sees a psychologist once a week, a process that she says has helped her process the events that are still fresh in her mind.

Healing has begun, and although the judicial case she experienced did not end in the way she had hoped, she does not regret it. "I think going through the judicial process was the biggest step of the healing process," she said. "I stood up for myself when my wounds were still fresh."

To students who have experienced sexual assault and are unsure if the judicial process is an option he or she should pursue, Newbridge said to go for it.

"I think people who are debating whether or not to go through the judicial process, and ultimately choose not to, will in the long run regret their decision," she said. "And wish they had taken the opportunity to have control and power in the aftermath of an assault."