

# Frequently Asked Questions about the Old Firehouse Assistance Center (OFAC)

Current as of 11/16/2017

## 1. What is the Old Firehouse Assistance Center (OFAC) and what is its purpose?

*The Old Firehouse Assistance Center (OFAC) serves the homeless population of McHenry County, Illinois, by providing daytime shelter, meals, showers, grooming supplies, social services, medical care, mental health screenings/treatment linkage, addiction screenings/treatment linkage, haircuts, AA meetings, and other services, all of which are offered free-of charge to our homeless guests. Our mission is to alleviate or eliminate the conditions that caused our guests to become homeless, to provide needed services for our guests, to integrate each guest back into being productive and accepted members of society, and to locate permanent housing for each of our guests.*

## 2. Why was the Old Firehouse Assistance Center formed?

*The Old Firehouse Assistance Center (OFAC) was formed in response to a plea in from the mayor of the City of Woodstock, Brian Sager, who asked for help with the city's growing homeless population. The mayor made this plea in April 2015 at a homelessness summit that was held in McHenry, IL. The mayor explained that the city of Woodstock was receiving many complaints from business owners and residents about the homeless in Woodstock, particularly those who congregated in and around the Woodstock Square. The mayor offered the free use of an unused city building to an agency that would use the building as a site to address these issues. Sue Rose, community services director of McHenry County Housing Authority, approached the mayor after the meeting with her plan of a "one-stop-shop" service center where providers would come to the center to offer their services. Sue noted that most of those who are homeless lack transportation and have many other barriers that stand in the way of ending their homelessness. In order to break the cycle, it was crucial to have easily-accessible services. The idea of the Old Firehouse Assistance Center was born.*

## 3. I've heard that the Old Firehouse Assistance Center was only open one day per week at first, and other days were added later, but now it's open Monday through Friday. Why did it take a while to get to 5 days?

*The Old Firehouse Assistance Center (OFAC) opened on January 20, 2016, one day per week, on Wednesdays only. At that time the OFAC shared part of the building with SEDOM (Special Education District of McHenry County), who was in their last semester of using the site part-time to conduct one class for young adult children who are disabled. As SEDOM's need for the site decreased, we were able to add Thursdays to our schedule, beginning on May 12, 2016. SEDOM vacated the site completely in June 2016, but we could not add more days at that time because that would have required additional staff and funding, which we did not have. After we secured enough funding to hire a part-time site manager, we hired Megan Bennett, who began on November 2, 2016. With Megan onboard we could add another day, so on December 6, 2016, Tuesdays were added to the OFAC's schedule. It became apparent we would need to get the site open 5 days a week in order to provide the level of services that are required to properly assist our homeless population, but additional funding would be needed in order to achieve this. In October 2017, additional funding was secured, allowing us to increase Megan's hours to full-time and to hire a homeless services assistant. So, beginning on October 30, 2017, we were able to get the OFAC open 5 days per week, Monday through Friday, 9 AM to 3 PM (closed on holidays).*

## 4. Why is it called the "Old Firehouse Assistance Center?"

*The Old Firehouse Assistance Center's building housed the City of Woodstock's fire department until the fire department moved to a bigger facility.*

**5. Who is responsible for the Old Firehouse Assistance Center (OFAC)?**

*The Old Firehouse Assistance Center (OFAC) is an entity of the McHenry County Housing Authority (MCHA). MCHA provides the staff, manages the site, and coordinates the volunteers and service providers who come to the site. The City of Woodstock owns the building.*

**6. Where is the OFAC located?**

*The OFAC is located at 120 W. South St., Woodstock, IL 60098. It is on the corner of South and Throop, right behind Woodstock's City Hall and just two blocks south of the historic Woodstock Square.*

**7. What days and hours are the OFAC open?**

*The OFAC is open year-round from 9 AM to 3 PM, Monday through Friday. The OFAC is closed on holidays.*

**8. Why is the OFAC closed at night and on weekends and holidays?**

*The OFAC is a social services center rather than a "warming" center or a "drop-in" center. The OFAC is designed to deliver social services for people who are homeless, so our hours need to accommodate the service providers who come to the site. Most of these service providers are not available on nights, weekends, or holidays.*

**9. How many homeless people use the OFAC?**

*More than 397 homeless guests have visited the OFAC since we opened on January 20, 2016. We usually see at least 35 of those homeless guests per day, but that depends on the day and the weather. Most of our homeless guests travel on foot, so we tend to see fewer guests when the weather is too extreme for them to get to the OFAC, such as during snow storms, pouring rain, or extreme heat waves.*

**10. I've heard that the reason the OFAC has served so many people is because it "imports" homeless people from other counties. Is this true?**

*The OFAC does NOT import people from other counties. In fact, we have a 90 day McHenry County residency policy, so all of the people we serve are from this area, and most have lived in Woodstock.*

**11. Some people feel that since the OFAC opened, there have been more problems in and around the Woodstock Square caused by homeless people. Can you comment on this?**

*This is a perfect example of "guilt by association." The OFAC has been around since January 20, 2016. In the summer of 2017, residents started complaining about the homeless population when there seemed to be an increase of people who are homeless, congregating in the Woodstock Square. Some of these folks (a group of approximately 10 people), behaved poorly and the assumption in the community was that these were wayward guests of the OFAC who had been lured to the area by our services. In reality, many of these folks had never set foot inside of the OFAC. They had been camping in secluded areas of the community and had been roused out of their campsites after a crackdown on illegal camping. In an attempt to manage this bad behavior in the Square, the City of Woodstock instituted a "parks management" ordinance that prohibited loitering and certain behaviors in the Square. This displaced the homeless to the perimeter of the square, where, much to the dismay of the city and the OFAC, some of these folks decided to camp out on city-owned benches, where their bad behavior continued. The OFAC is located two blocks south of the Square, so the city determined that a good solution to this problem would be to divert this group to the picnic area in front of the OFAC, regardless*

*of whether we were open or closed. We expressed our concern about having people congregate in front of the OFAC when we were not around to supervise them, but ultimately the OFAC is city-owned property. Then, just as we had predicted, those who were diverted to our picnic area behaved badly when we weren't around. To complicate matters further, some well-intentioned individuals and church groups began to deliver food to the people who were gathering in our picnic area when we were closed. This created a huge mess for us and it attracted minor teenagers from the area who came to hang out with the homeless. The neighbors and passers-by complained about the noise and the mess and the behavior, and we can certainly understand why. It was giving us a bad reputation that we feel was undeserved as we had not wanted anyone in our picnic area when we were closed. After several discussions with the city, it was agreed that the city police would enforce our long-standing policy of no one being allowed to use our picnic area when we are closed. This action moved those homeless folks back into the areas around the Square, but the OFAC continued to get blamed for their existence. Regardless of the reality of the situation, some very vocal members of the community persist in their assumption that the OFAC is responsible for bringing these badly behaved homeless individuals into their neighborhoods. It is important to keep in mind that the OFAC has served more than 397 people, and the "problems" are being caused by approximately 10 people who were already living in the community before the OFAC existed. These ten people are a very challenging group to serve who have significant barriers to overcoming their homelessness, but we are doing our best to try and assist them.*

**12. What kind of volunteer opportunities are available and how do I apply to volunteer?**

*We need volunteers, age 21 and over, to monitor and interact with the OFAC's homeless guests, cook and serve food onsite, provide meals, clean, do laundry, sort supplies, and to provide other assistance and services. Those who are interested in volunteering will be given an "OFAC Volunteer Application" form to fill out. It will ask you the obvious questions, such as your name and contact information, and it will also ask you other questions about yourself. The application helps us to determine who will be a good fit to volunteer at the OFAC. After we review your application, we'll arrange for you to take a tour of the OFAC and we'll add you to our schedule listserv so you can schedule your volunteer work times.*

**13. What shifts are available for volunteers who want to monitor and interact with the OFAC's guests?**

*Each onsite volunteer shift is three hours and fifteen minutes long. There are two shifts available each day, 8:45 AM – 12 PM, and 12 PM – 3:15 PM, Monday through Friday, except for holidays when the OFAC is closed. Volunteers usually schedule their time with us well in advance of the days that they want to volunteer. The OFAC Volunteer Schedule Calendar is usually completely filled at least a month ahead of time.*

**14. I want to volunteer, but I work when the OFAC is open. Are there volunteer opportunities that won't conflict with my work hours?**

*There are many volunteer opportunities for those who work schedule conflicts with the OFAC's hours. For example, one volunteer arranged for a special collection at her church and then gave the funds to the OFAC. Another volunteer arranged for a collection of socks, and underwear. Volunteers have knitted hats and scarves for our guests, and several volunteers have collected supplies for us. Some volunteers have arranged to have restaurants deliver food to the OFAC. The opportunities are endless.*

**15. I'm interested in volunteering to monitor and interact with the OFAC's homeless guests, but I'm not sure what to expect and what is expected of me. What can you tell me about the guests?**

*We want volunteers who are patient, kind, tolerant and understanding of people who are homeless. Our homeless guests may have a variety of challenging conditions, such as mental illness, substance*

*abuse issues, behavioral problems and physical disabilities. Some of our guests may have a criminal history. However, most of our guests, even those who might be somewhat high or intoxicated, tend to be well-behaved, and those who are not are made to leave for the day. Some of our guests have conditions that may cause them to get a bit loud at times and sometimes they can have moments when they can be a bit disruptive, but we do not allow criminal activity, dangerous behavior, alcohol or drug consumption onsite or on the grounds of the OFAC. Guests who are extremely disruptive or extremely intoxicated or high, or who are threatening others, will be assessed by MCHA staff who will enforce our alcohol/drug/behavior policy. MCHA staff will allow the guest to return at a later date if it is safe to do so and it is determined that the guest will be able to control themselves.*

**16. Why doesn't the OFAC breathalyze or drug test the homeless guests?**

*Breathalyzing and drug testing are usually used to exclude or eliminate someone from being involved in an activity. Substance abuse is common in the homeless population. We do not breathalyze or drug test because we want to assist those homeless guests in getting help for their addictions. Those who are abusing alcohol or drugs are linked with the appropriate treatment services. So, if we breathalyzed, we would not be able to identify those who need help and we would not be able to get them the help that they need. However, we do not allow consumption of alcohol or drugs in the OFAC or on the property, nor do we allow extremely intoxicated/high behavior. All of our guests are required to sign our alcohol/drug/behavior policy. This policy outlines the specific penalties (suspensions) for violators, which is enforced by the OFAC's staff.*

**17. If I want to volunteer to provide a meal, can you suggest a menu? Do I need to bring a dessert? Can food be prepared at home or must it be purchased from a grocery or restaurant?**

*Almost any type of food is fine, except for foods containing hot spices (some of our guests have health problems and can't tolerate spicy food). We get donuts donated from Swiss Maid Bakery, so we always have something sweet on hand and it is not necessary to bring dessert unless you want to. It is perfectly okay to bring something that is inexpensive but filling, such as Sloppy Joes, spaghetti, or macaroni and cheese. For liability reasons we recommend that the food should be purchased from a grocery, deli, restaurant or caterer. We also allow cooking onsite at the OFAC as our site manager is certified in food safety and sanitation.*

**18. Besides food, should volunteers who provide meals for the OFAC also provide plastic utensils, napkins, plates, bottles water, juice, milk, etc.?**

*While we always need and welcome these items, it is not expected that you bring them when you bring meals unless you want to. If we had to pick one item from this list that we need most it would be bottled water. We go through a LOT of bottled water.*

**19. What does the OFAC need in the way of services?**

*We welcome any services that might help our guests end their homelessness, or give them tools for abstaining from smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, or abusing substances. For example, we have volunteers who conduct AA meetings onsite, another volunteer teaches yoga, relaxation techniques and meditation, and another volunteer, who is a licensed cosmetologist, gave free haircuts. If you have a skill that might be helpful for our guests, please don't hesitate to contact us.*

**20. What types of supplies and other products are needed for onsite use at the OFAC?**

*We do not have room for a commercial dishwasher at the OFAC, so we must use disposable food service items. We are always in need of disposables such as paper plates, soup bowls, coffee cups, plastic*

*eating utensils, paper napkins, as well as paper towels, toilet paper, plastic kitchen-sized garbage can liners, large plastic food storage bags, stick-on name badges, etc. We also need staples such as ground coffee, powdered creamer, sugar, bottled water, breakfast bars, large boxes of pasta, large cans of chili, large cans of vegetables, pancake syrup, etc.*

*We use a lot of the following supplies: full-sized shower gel (no bar soap please, it makes a mess in our shower), shampoo, conditioner, toilet bowl cleaner (“The Works” seems to work best in our hard water), dishwashing liquid, window cleaner, all-surface cleaner, disinfecting wipes, laundry detergent, bleach, etc. All donations to the OFAC are tax-deductible.*

## **21. Does the OFAC need supplies and other items that it can give away to its guests?**

*We distribute personal care items to our guests and we always need items such as antiperspirant, Q-tips, nail clippers, combs, athlete’s foot powder, shaving razors, insect repellent, etc. Travel sizes are appreciated as our guests are usually on-foot and have to carry the items. However, we’ve found that bagged “care kits” do not work well as our guests tend to dismantle such kits to take only what they need as it lightens their load. We respectfully ask that those who want to donate such items do not pack them together in individual bags. In addition to the items previously listed, our guests often ask for new back packs, rain ponchos, new underwear, new t-shirts, new sweatshirts, and new socks. All donations to the OFAC are tax-deductible.*

## **22. Can I donate cash? Is it tax-deductible?**

*Yes! Cash donations are always needed and always welcome! All donations to the OFAC, cash or otherwise, are tax-deductible under section 170(c)(1) of the Internal Revenue Code. Checks should be made out to “McHenry County Housing Authority” and “OFAC” should be written in the memo line. Mail or deliver checks to MCHA’s office at 1108 N. Seminary, Woodstock, IL 60098. We will be happy to give you a written acknowledgment of your donation.*

## **23. Are those under the age of 21 able to participate in any way?**

*We cannot allow those under age 21 to volunteer onsite at the OFAC due to liability reasons, however, youth groups have conducted fundraisers for us, and they’ve also done drives for items such as new socks, underwear, hats, gloves, and shower supplies. An Eagle Scout candidate and his troop made a picnic table and benches for us. So, even though the kids can’t actually come inside of the OFAC, we welcome their participation and we send them photos of the results of their efforts.*

## **24. Where can I see photos of what goes on at the OFAC?**

*Check out our Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/OldFirehouseAssistanceCenter/> and please make sure to “Like” the page when you’re there!*

## **25. Who can I contact if I want to volunteer or if I want more information about the OFAC?**

*Megan Bennett joined McHenry County Housing Authority’s team in November 2016 as the OFAC site manager. Megan does all of the scheduling of volunteers and service providers, and she manages the day-to-day operation of the OFAC. Megan can be reached at the OFAC by calling (815) 337-9809, or by emailing her at: [mbennett@mchenrycountyhousing.org](mailto:mbennett@mchenrycountyhousing.org).*

*Sue Rose, Community Services Director of the McHenry County Housing Authority, designed the OFAC concept, was a founder of the OFAC, and is still very much involved in its operation. Sue’s phone number is (815) 338-7752 ext. 137, or email Sue at: [srose@mchenrycountyhousing.org](mailto:srose@mchenrycountyhousing.org)*