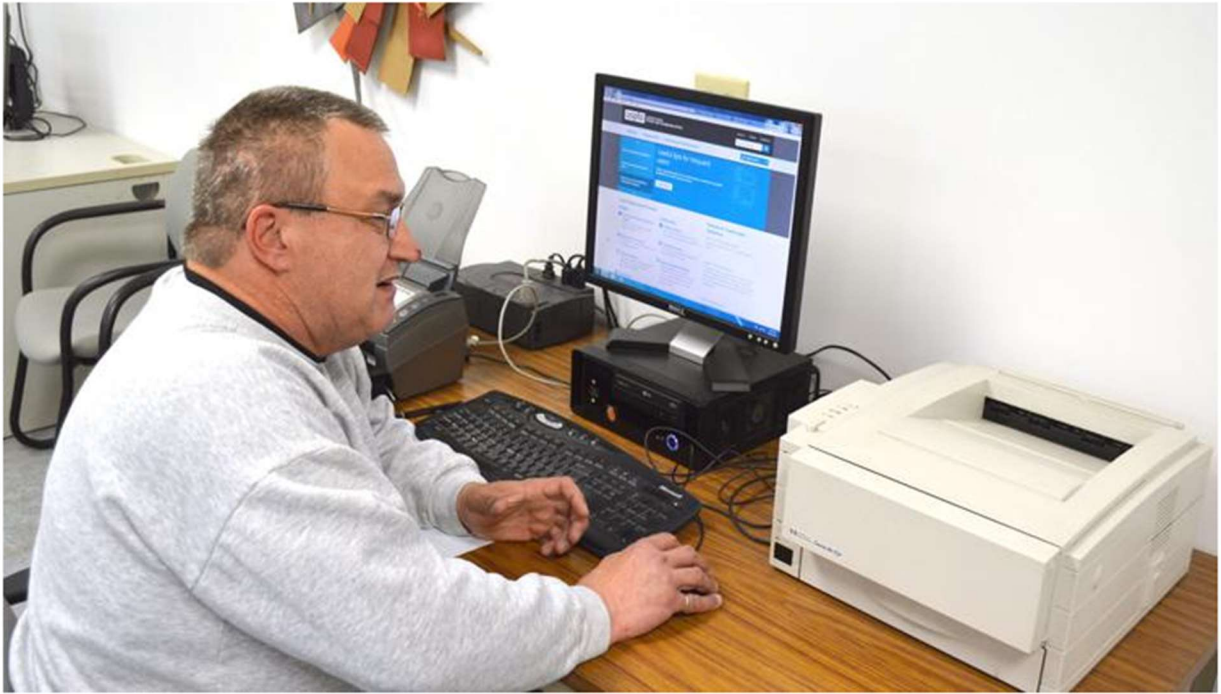




## Keys to Hope off to busy start

By RICHARD CHAMBERS Staff Writer / Apr 25, 2015



Ross Moore uses a computer at the recently opened Keys to Hope Resource Center on Friday.  
Richard Chambers

MICHIGAN CITY — On Tuesday, Russell Groth had his hair cut by Bethany Howard and went off to a job interview.

It was his first successful interview since 1979. And considering his state in life, it came at an ideal time.

That's because Howard isn't a hair stylist, she's a volunteer. And Groth isn't your average job seeker, he's homeless.

Groth is one of the early success stories at Keys to Hope Resource Center.

After two years of being homeless, Keys to Hope was the first place to help him, Groth said, whereas before he thought nobody cared. He heard about the resource center at the Salvation Army's shelter and has been coming since its opening on April 13.

"They do a good job. You guys are on it," Groth said Friday.

Keys to Hope has helped dozens of people in its first two weeks, according to Director Lesley Saliga. This service from Citizens Concerned for the Homeless offers a resource center for those who are homeless.

Each person's needs will be different, Saliga said, but the mission is to help everyone to achieve self-sufficiency. The center addresses what it calls the ABC's of self-sufficiency: appearance, behavior and change.

As of Friday, the center had received 224 visits.

She and the volunteers ask everyone to complete an intake evaluation, which considers each person's needs; health history; any drug, alcohol or legal history; and spiritual matters. As of Friday, the center had done 35 comprehensive intakes.

These intakes help people to set goals that are right for them. Their needs may include finding health insurance, signing up for food stamps or coming to the classes the center provides.

"It's going very smoothly. We're just excited to be able to help the community and to help the homeless," she said.

The center's facilities for cleaning will help people turn their lives around, she believes, because hygiene is a major factor in self-confidence. One person told her of a reluctance to interact with others because of the shame of bad hygiene, but now that person is not ashamed.

So far, 35 people have used the laundry facility, with some doing multiple loads, and people have taken a total of 67 showers.

Saliga's faith motivates her efforts. Her background and skills prepare her for the exact type of work here because this is what God wants her to do, she believes.

She holds a bachelor's degree in communications from Purdue University and had worked in nonprofits for seven years in such areas as grant writing, outreach, community development and career advising.

Three classes are offered so far at the center: Michelle Alexandre, a licensed clinical social worker, teaches a class called "Hope," which covers stress management and coping skills; Jim Musial, executive director of Sand Castle Shelter for Homeless Families, teaches a class on class for quitting smoking and a class for wellness and healthy living.

Ross Moore found out about the center after seeing it while walking past and hearing more through the Sacred Heart Food Pantry. He likes the shower and laundry facilities, and he has been attending the wellness class and using the computers to search for a job.

The center also plans to connect homeless people to community groups. Saliga is developing a volunteer program so people who find help at the center also can give back to the community. She has already established a relationship with the Michigan City Parks and Recreation Department, and six users of the center will soon go to Washington Park and paint the fence.

Volunteering will benefit the users too because it will help establish professional connections in the community, she said.

Mike Pease, who uses the center himself, has been volunteering since January with the things, such as painting, the center needed to be ready to open.

"They've helped a lot of people here already," he said.

He is doing part-time work through the Experience Works program for seniors and plans to learn computers and return to Georgia.

Amy Ailes has been completing an internship through her social work program at Purdue University North Central. She switched her major to social work because she loves to help others.

She was helping at Sand Castle when Musial told her of this place, so she started working here in February. One of her goals is a research project for PNC to see what more can be done for men who are homeless.

Men need as much help as women, Ailes said, but they have more difficulty asking. More men are homeless than people realize, she said, and they get stereotyped as lazy and bad for business.

This stereotypes are false, she said. Homeless men are just trying to make their lives better in the situation they are in.

"They don't choose this. It just happened," she said.

Homelessness can only be understood by those who have experienced it, she said.

The center, at 1802 Franklin St., is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. It can be reached at 219-809-9903.

The center will hold a grand opening from 4-7 p.m. June 9.