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Homeless group’s tough tactics draw criticism

SHARE provides more taxpayer-funded shelter than any other organization in King County, but its support is wavering amid scrutiny of its strict policies and use of public money.

By Emily Heffter

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Almost 100 homeless people packed into City Hall for a meeting of the King County Committee to End Homelessness in April. They were a powerful lobby — the faces of homelessness, each with a story to tell.

They stayed for an hour before crossing the street and lining up to write their names on Scott Morrow’s yellow legal pad.

Anyone who doesn’t sign in with Morrow to show they were there risks being kicked out of their encampment for a week, explained Valerie Siegfried, who has been homeless for a year and a half and lives in a North King County tent encampment.

“If we want to be in a shelter, if we want to stay alive, then we are required to do this,” she said.

This is an unseen cost of staying in shelters operated by SHARE, the Seattle Housing and Resource Effort, which provides more taxpayer-funded beds for homeless people than anyone in King County, and does it for a fraction of the cost.

Now questions about the way the nonprofit treats the people it serves are fueling a lack of confidence in the organization.

Allegations the group has been misusing public money, illegally withholding bus tickets, and forcing the homeless into activism has caught the attention of the Seattle Police Department and FBI. Seattle City Attorney Pete Holmes said his office gave to police emails, financial documents, meeting notes and other records that show possible criminal conduct.

Morrow, a founder of the nonprofit, is not accused of profiting personally from SHARE revenue. He says he does not talk on the record.

Seattle Deputy Mayor Darryl Smith said the city would never approve of SHARE requiring advocacy in return for shelter. He has heard rumors, but nothing substantiated, he said. The mayor’s office has never asked for an investigation and is pursuing legislation to allow additional tent cities in Seattle.


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Exhibit #36
“We want to provide emergency shelter for anybody who needs it,” Smith said. “We hate the fact that stuff like this potentially goes on.”

SHARE officially runs two encampments and 16 indoor shelters, plus some storage lockers. Nickelsville, a third encampment, is illegally on city property and has the same governing model. Morrow organizes Nickelsville and sometimes sleeps there.

SHARE pays each of its eight employees $15,000 a year, for 30 hours of work per week.

Authorities started investigating this winter after about 60 residents of Tent City 4, in Kirkland, splintered off to form their own camp and were open about their concerns. Now a group of Eastside churches is reconsidering its support of SHARE, said the Rev. Bill Kirlin-Hackett, director of the Interfaith Task Force on Homelessness.

In Seattle, the City Council is trying to find more traditional shelter for people staying at the SHARE-associated Nickelsville encampment, citing concerns about conditions there.

The people whom SHARE serves say they are under constant threat of losing shelter or transportation. The obligations that come with living in a SHARE camp or indoor shelter can make it difficult to find and keep jobs, residents say.

In the fall of 2012, SHARE said it needed more bus tickets to get through the winter, but the city and county refused. So SHARE closed down its shelters and set up a camp at the King County Administration Building. Residents said in letters to City Council members that they were told they would be denied shelter after the camp-out if they didn’t participate.

SHARE residents “were told if we didn’t go, we would be barred from all SHARE shelters,” wrote one former camper, Mike Ankerstjerne. “I was looking for a job with fervor, and missed four interviews.”

Another man, Mike Messer, wrote that Morrow “blackmailed us into doing his forced advocacy by threatening us with loss of bus tickets if we didn’t ‘volunteer’ to sleep at the courthouse.”

About two weeks later, SHARE got the bus tickets and reopened its shelters.

SHARE leaders deny that people were forced to camp out. Board member Jarvis Capucion said anyone was welcomed back after the protest was over, whether they participated or not.

“Everyone is encouraged to participate,” he said. “If I’m someone like me that cares about SHARE and I like the place that I’m staying, then I will participate. ... That’s part of being in the community. If you care about this place, you need to help us keep this place.”

Capucion himself has had run-ins with the rules before. He was barred from a SHARE tent city several years ago, for theft. He said there was a misunderstanding when he borrowed something. He moved to another tent city, where he has lived for three years.

People are told when they sign up for SHARE shelter that they must participate in the community, Capucion said. “Those not willing to participate cannot stay here.”

But some residents say they feel taken advantage of.

A group in 2011 was told they were going to a public meeting, but once in the van, they were driven to West Seattle to help the Nickelsville encampment set up, said Elizabeth, a homeless woman who helped organize the trip. She did not want her last name published. “People were really upset,” she said.

Capucion said the new Nickelsville site was a secret, so no one knew where they were going when they boarded the vans that day. But he said people should have been told they were going to help Nickelsville move.
“If they claim to have been told otherwise, then somebody lied to them or gave them bad information,” he said.

Camp residents also say they risk losing shelter if they don’t come up with gift cards or other donated items for the organization’s annual fundraising auction.

“A place to stay safe”

At the same time, SHARE is helping to fill a vast need. A one-night count in January found 2,736 people without shelter in King County. That includes about 250 people staying in four tent cities, which are not government funded.

The city gives hundreds of thousands of dollars every year to SHARE for shelter. Mary Flowers, the city’s senior grants and contracts specialist, described the group as “really more of an advocacy organization in many ways than a direct-service outfit.”

Stories about SHARE’s draconian rules have circulated for years, and Morrow, 55, has always been in the background. Morrow does not collect a salary. His business card says he is a SHARE consultant. But he is widely feared by residents and staff who say he is the architect of the organization’s culture.

The premise of SHARE has been the same since it formed in 1990. While traditional, faith-based shelters offer social workers, church services, 12-step programs, job training and other services, SHARE simply offers a mat and a blanket. Everyone must agree to be part of the self-management structure of SHARE and follow some basic rules, which includes staying sober.

SHARE, on its website, describes itself as a self-help group, and not a social-service organization.

SHARE charges the city $5.60 per bed, per night, to keep its shelters running. That’s about half what the next-cheapest city-funded shelter costs.

Since 1997, Seattle has continued to increase its contract with SHARE, paying the organization $403,000 in 2012 to provide up to 300 beds a night.

SHARE also raises money from private sources, and it gets about $20,000 a year from King County and a subsidy so it can buy $573,625 worth of bus tickets at an 80 percent discount.

Almost all of SHARE’s shelter space is donated by churches, and laundry — a major expense — is free at the Catholic Community Services-owned Aloha Inn.

“We provide simple shelter,” said Capucion. “People need a place to stay safe and to be able to go to sleep, basically. That’s the gist of what our shelter’s all about.”

Controversial advocate

Morrow, an Everett native who has been an advocate for the poor his entire adult life, worked for the Seattle Tenants Union before founding SHARE. Police records show decades of arrests for protesting on behalf of homeless people.

“He is one of the most dedicated people I have ever known,” said Joe Martin, an old friend who works for Pike Market Medical Clinic. “There are very few people who can measure up to the kind of dedication that Scott Morrow has demonstrated time and time again.”

Morrow holds “office hours” three mornings a week from 6:30 to 7:30, passing out coffee at Victor Steinbrueck Park. He stays most often at friends’ houses or with his partner, a Kirkland teacher who has a home in Bellevue.
“He is utterly devoted,” said Tim Harris, the executive director of Real Change. “He’s a risk-taker. He is extremely strategic in some ways and very rigid in others.”

While plenty of people dedicate their working lives to helping people, Martin said Morrow dedicates his entire life.

Morrow also wields tremendous political power. He has access to hundreds of homeless people who say they are required to show up and sometimes speak at public meetings and are forbidden from talking about SHARE with members of the churches that host them.

To pressure political decision-makers for more resources, SHARE has hosted mandatory campouts on council members’ lawns, at the mayor’s home and at the King County Administration Building.

Martin said SHARE is unique because it empowers people who would otherwise remain silent.

“SHARE is a politically-charged program that provides services and also is a program that expects its participants to stand up for themselves and stand up for issues,” he said.

The group has seen its budget grow each year. Despite donations and more than $800,000 in annual revenue, SHARE for years has complained in monthly reports to the city that it may not have enough money to continue operating.

In 2011, Efran Agmata, a city human-services department employee, checked out that claim and reported the organization was, in fact, operating on a shoestring. In an interview, Agmata said he did not audit the organization’s spending. He looked at its processes to make sure, for example, that SHARE employees had time sheets and that the board of directors knew how much money the city was giving SHARE.

“I take their statements at face value. If this is what they give me, then this is what I have.”

He also noted the organization wasn’t keeping track of in-kind donations, making it hard to verify what the group needs to pay for.

**Strict rules**

The city’s human-services department has never investigated SHARE’s tactics, and political leaders take a cautious approach.

When Councilmember Richard Conlin learned by email earlier this year that Morrow had removed portable toilets from the Nickelsville encampment to punish campers, he replied, “This is very disturbing.”

He didn’t pursue it, he said, because he didn’t think he had the leverage to do anything.

Mike Johnson, a senior program director for the Union Gospel Mission, put it this way: “I think we all like the idea, and because SHARE has this way of presenting itself as being very democratized — ‘hey, we’re just homeless people’ — when you criticize SHARE or the leadership, you’re criticizing the homeless people, and nobody wants to do that.”

But SHARE’s culture of rules and consequences is hardly a secret.

The organization notes on its monthly reports to the city which of its shelters were closed for a night or two as punishment, which the organization calls “accountability.” For example, if shelter residents don’t kick out a person who missed a SHARE meeting or was caught with alcohol or drugs.

SHARE’s shelters are “democratic,” which means a simple majority is all it takes to put any resident back on the street. Staying at a shelter means adhering to a 50-page book of

procedures and obeying rules set by the governing body at each camp and shelter. Without many options, the people staying at the shelters usually do what they’re told.

Capucion said requirements and strict rules are crucial to SHARE, “to keep order.”

“Some people who would rather not do anything, this is not for them,” he said.

Harris, of Real Change, said he has heard story after story about SHARE’s rules turning lives upside down.

“In some ways, the SHARE shelters are very empowering to the people involved, but there’s this dark side to it,” he said. “To me, it just feels inflexible and draconian and the sort of thing that is going to create ill will with any organization, and I think that it winds up being a top-down enforcement of a rigid rule that in the long run undermines the community that it’s designed to create.”

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