

A Hidden Community

by [Chris Schulz, The Dominion Post](#)
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If you're out in Morgantown on a Thursday night, there's a chance you may run into a group, made up primarily of students, on High Street. In a college town that's almost a guarantee, but this group isn't out to hit the bars and clubs. These students, wearing backpacks and carrying tote bags, all full of clothes and food, are MUSHROOM volunteers.

MUSHROOM, which stands for Multidisciplinary UnSheltered Homeless Relief Outreach Of Morgantown, is a community service program of West Virginia University's Department of Family Medicine with two objectives. One is to give the aspiring health professionals of WVU's health sciences programs an opportunity to work together; that's the multidisciplinary in MUSHROOM.

The other objective is, "to reach out to those most marginalized from society," the homeless and unhoused in the Morgantown area, and provide them with basic care and necessities.

Volunteers gathered at 6:45pm this past Thursday in the Pleasant Street garage to distribute donated resources – clothes, boots, food, toiletries – into the bags that each carries. The group numbered around 15, but before materials could be distributed, a group of people approached asking for help.

People whose few worldly possessions were lost earlier this week after police and city workers dismantled an encampment on the banks of Decker's Creek.

"That's what that buzz was all about," said Susan Pinto. "Folks saying things like, 'I need X, Y, or Z because my stuff is gone. My stuff was taken.'"

Pinto is a Clinical Assistant Professor in the Family / Community Health Department at WVU's School of Nursing and has been volunteering with MUSHROOM for 10 years.

"I came out and just recognize that there was a huge unmet need. There's a clear link between health outcomes and poverty."

The group split into two smaller, more manageable – and less intimidating – groups. One group took to the rail trails, while the other made its way towards the library, starting from the High Street Bridge.

As the group progressed, anyone who looked like they could use some help was politely asked if they or anyone they know could use some resources.

"Just because someone looks homeless, doesn't mean they are, and vice versa" Pinto warned before the rounds began. "Don't assume, ask."

Some politely refused, but many accepted something from the bags the group carried. All were met with a warm smile and a respectful tone. The leaders and volunteer veterans greeted those they recognize like old friends.

After a conversation with a gentleman on Wall Street, one volunteer let out a sigh of relief.

“I’m glad we saw him. He wasn’t around last time we were out and I started to worry about him,” she said.

“It does feel like a hidden community” Chirstine Doepker said, standing in the Pleasant Street parking lot that serves as MUSHROOM’s base of operations for their street rounds.

Doepker is a student at the WVU School of Medicine. She started volunteering with MUSHROOM to fulfill a community service requirement, but she kept coming back because of the people she met when out on street rounds.

“A lot of people don’t associate them as part of the community in Morgantown,” Doepker said. “I just feel like that’s a shame because they are a part of our community and it is our responsibility as the city of Morgantown to make sure that nobody’s forgotten.”

MUSHROOM is not limited to just health science students. Any community member who is interested in volunteering with the group can learn more at <https://medicine.hsc.wvu.edu/fammed/students/community-services/mushroom/>.

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