

Editorial: Bright ray of hope

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2011 (Updated 3:00 am)

Police say complaints about homeless people in downtown Greensboro have fallen significantly since “street teams” began approaching them about available assistance within easy walking distance.

The key, says street team member Teresa Hicks, is to hold “conversations,” not “interrogations.” And to treat the homeless like anyone else, with respect and common decency.

Hicks ought to know. She was once homeless herself.

Hicks is employed by the Interactive Resource Center, which opened at its new site on East Washington Street in May, and which partnered with Downtown Greensboro Inc. on the center-city initiative in the fall. The IRC also provides a variety of services and training programs for the homeless.

More importantly, the IRC is a lot like its neighbor, the J. Douglas Galyon Depot, connecting clients to the means to get from here to there through an impressive assortment of partner agencies.

A recent visit on a gray, rainy day revealed a full house of homeless clients, some conferring quietly with center staff, others socializing as they waited to be seen. Two huge, brightly lit Christmas trees stood in opposite corners of the reception area. On a big, white, dry-erase board was a quote for the day, which read in part, “Remember, every day is a new day.”

That doesn’t necessarily mean every day is a good day. Two clients had gotten into a shouting match that very morning. But the overall vibe at the IRC is distinctly upbeat and hopeful.

A client can get mail there, wash laundry, take a shower, get a haircut and enroll in job-hunting courses, including computer training. The center helps locate temporary shelter and permanent housing for clients. It refers those who want and need it to drug treatment and counseling.

In return, clients help take care of the IRC. They keep it clean. They report misconduct. They created many of the paintings on the IRC’s walls as well as the sculpted handles on the plate-glass front doors. What’s more, fully a third of the 2,000 weekly volunteer hours at the center are filled by homeless workers.

The new facility has been open at its permanent location on Washington Street only for eight months. But it already is making a measurable difference: 3,776 loads of laundry, 2,652 showers, 3,432 nurse visits and 121 full-time permanent

jobs found since opening in May, says IRC Executive Director Liz Seymour.

The center also has placed 221 adults and children in permanent housing. In January, the IRC will pass the 4,000-client mark, counting visits at its original location at Bessemer United Methodist Church, which opened in January 2009.

But funding remains a challenge, Demand for services is up, but only 14,000 of the available 22,000 square feet in the building is being used.

On the same day as that recent visit, the community held a march that began at the IRC and ended at Grace Community Church, to remember the lives lost by the local homeless. There were at least nine in 2011.

But now there is a place to go where people will greet you with a smile and a kind word and take you in and lift you up.