# Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020 and Homeless Shelter’s Responses: Western Carolina Rescue Ministries Interview with Men’s Recovery and Discipleship Program David Spray.

Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020 and Homeless Shelter’s Response: Western Carolina Rescue Ministries Interview with Men’s Recovery and Discipleship Program, David Spray.

Interviewee: David Spray Men’s Recovery and Discipleship Program Director

Interviewer: Matthew Beaver

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Duration: 36:05

Matthew Beaver: This is Matthew Beaver. This recording is taking place on Thursday, October first, 2020, at [pause] 10:01 A.M. via Zoom. And let’s see here. I ‘am conversing with Mr. David Spray with Men’s Recovery and Discipleship Directory with Western Carolina Rescue Ministries. Before we officially begin, may I ask if I have your permission to record this conversation to be used in an analytical historical context in the future?

David Spray: Yes, you do.

MB: Ok. Now let us begin, let’s see. May I ask, Mr. Spray how you got personally involved with Western Carolina Mini-Rescue Ministries and why?

DS: Back in 2007 my wife and I moved back into the area thinking that we were going to start another nonprofit and I interviewed—very similar to what you’re doing today. I sat down with the executive director and just said, “Hey talk to me a little bit about what it means to, run a non-profit and how it is involved with the day to day,” and he said “well the funny thing is while you think about doing that, I need to add some staff members and – he asked me to come on and help out. In their sells and marketing, well not their sells and marketing but their marketing department, helping do development and fundraising for the mission. And since I have a background in sales and marketing with Eaton Corporation it was a very good fit. And he said it “come on in and do those things you know how to do and you can learn from us the rest of the nonprofit work.” So, that was in ’07 and I did that from ’07 to 2011 and then I went to pastor for a number of years and then was invited back on staff just about two years ago, in August. So, that’s a total of about five and a half or six years here and then -- spread over the last thirteen years.

MB: Ok. During that time, may I ask what learned about the overall mission of Western Carolina Rescue Ministries is?

DS: -- To say that the overall mission is definitely not one thing—we --when I got here at the mission back then, there was a men’s recovery program. The woman’s program had existed for a while but we had closed it because for whatever organizational reasons. The ministry decided to focus more on the men’s area. Woman’s ministries is a lot trickery and a lot harder and even more expensive to operate because – our men’s program the guys here actually help run the rescue mission downstairs but because we are trying to protect the ladies here from any outside influences or from people who would seek to mistreat them, we wind up having to staff that area much more heavily and it comes with a cost, a financial cost, a staffing cost and just – all the way around I guess, more administrative hurdles for us.

So, back then it was a men’s recovery program and an overnight shelter, and a feeding service and those pieces have all stayed in place for the last decade. But since then we have also reopened the women’s recovery area. We’ve expanded it and now we have a program that serves women who are coming from addiction, who have current pregnancies or have new babies, and it’s called “Abba’s House.” And then there is “Abba’s love” downstairs which is an overnight program for women who need shelter and food but then “Abba’s House” upstairs is for the women and the children.

MB: Ok. Before we get into more of the specifics of those programs. May I ask how Western Carolina Rescue Ministries has prepared itself for the Covid-19 pandemic and if they have what were the practices and processes for preparing for this?

DS: Sure! Back in March, really before the whole community had responded and the governor had made any declaration for the community. We decided to batten down the hatches before anybody else did. We probably about I guess it was three or four weeks before quarantine was even a word in the community. We decided to shelter in place for the entire ministry. We told—we sat down with everyone who is here and it was, it was a little unnerving for people that first night because we gathered everyone who was an overnight guess in the chapel and said, “Ok starting tonight, we’re going to be instituting a “shelter in place”, which means if you want to stay with us twenty-four-seven you can. Prior to that the people who were just overnight guests, would stay the night they would come in about 4:30 or 5:00, grab a meal, come to chapel, share a chapel with us, grab their showers after that and then stay the night and then around six-thirty in the morning they would go ahead and step on out. And some would go to work, and some would just kind of be in the community on the streets. That night when they came in for dinner we sat down with everybody and said, “Ok, based on what we see coming. We’re about to close our doors and we’re glad to take care of you, offer you a hundred-percent time and help.”

And five of our program directors left their homes and moved in to the --building and we either set up bedrooms in our offices or in storage closets. Our women’s ministry had a couple of extra rooms that were available and so—they stayed next door next to the women in our care. And then for the next almost four weeks, we were sheltered in place. Only leaving campus to go get supplies, always in a mask, very, very careful and then we knew we did not have any Covid cases then and—so we went ahead and sheltered ourselves. So, that we did not run the risk of getting it from anybody else. So, that was in the very beginning we went ahead and sheltered in place. Then after that—we shortly after that— went into isolation mode, where we wouldn’t bring in even volunteers to help out. And we’re still very limited on our, volunteer involvement, although our-- our doors are not open most of the things we’ll use volunteers for is going to be for outdoors and outside of our facility but still serving the same people.

MB: You said, you mentioned the isolation status, I did read about—about that in the news. May I ask if you mind discussing--discussing how this decision of isolation status was made or what were the pro’s, con’s, strength and the weaknesses about this status?

DS: The hard thing about isolation status-- is when we-- when we basically-- isolation had more to do with—people coming in to help us and our volunteer. In any given week, we’ll have people come to speak for chapel, we’ll have people come to share and serve lunch and dinner with us. They’ll come to-- help out cleaning, serving food distribution boxes, just about anything. So, let’s just say if we had, thirty come to fifty volunteers in a week, we had to contact them and just say, “Hey guys, we appreciate what you do, but we’re going to have to bring all of our work internal” --and obviously, the weakness of that is that we had to step up and the people who lived here wound up volunteering more in return for what we offered to them. So, if you got a free night’s stay you would also probably get to help out, organize or help out in the kitchen or clean up the dining room. Very similar to I guess, what my teenagers would do around our house. You know, they’ll do some chore but they’re definitely not expected to run the house, (7:56). They are expected kind of to be a part of that. The strengths of that were we kept everybody safe, you know the weaknesses were everybody was a little bit on edge. We had some people who don’t love crowds, who just would not stay overnight with us if they knew they couldn’t leave.

And I guess the hardest thing is though, we’re a no smoking campus, so those of our guests who wanted to smoke would step out onto the curb outside of our property line and you know probably six or seven smoke breaks a day and they would come back. I guess the hardest thing was when-- when we decided to shelter in place and stay here twenty-four-seven, probably a third of our people said “that’s not for me” and they left. And then once the first round of stimulus checks came through and people got some spending money in their pocket, another third of our people who had stayed with us left. Then—I guess the other hard thing has been moving from serving people in our dining rooms-- in the building -- to serving them out of doors in Styrofoam containers. So, men and women will line up, you know, outside on a cool day, on a warm day, on a rainy day, and we’ll set up tents if necessary to serve out of. And then people would just take their meal with them and eat in a convenient place and hopefully dispose of their food box in a sanitary respectful way for the community.

MB: May I ask, [coughs] Excuse me clearing my throat real quick. May I ask, how has Western Carolina Rescue Ministries, you mentioned volunteers? How have you been handling the incoming volunteers and is there a new process or anything to take them in such as sanitation or anything?

DS: Yeah, there is basically no new volunteers what we are doing-- actually that’s not true-- we have one new volunteer come in the last two weeks and we’re-- he’s getting to mow lawns and run the weed eater for us. That’s as close as we’re going to allow him to be to the facility but everybody else that’s serving right now is somebody who was pre-screened volunteer who had already passed a background check, four-five months ago. They might help us serve a meal out of the tents, they may help us organize a food box and deliver a food box to a vehicle but—or they may also help out our outdoor what we call our “outdoor clothing closet.” Which is basically four or five portable racks where people can come in and just make sure that they’ve got the necessities to get--to stay covered and to stay clothed.

All those volunteers have to wear a mask regardless of where they are. Appalachian Mountain Community health centers, and the Dale Fell clinic, have been wonderful little setup, a portable clinic that’s outdoors. In the past, they had what’s called the Maze Care Center that was in our facility, which was three days a week, pretty sure it was three days a week they offered primary care to the homeless population at free or reduced rates. And as a federally qualified health care center, FQHC, part of their charge is to serve everybody in the community regardless of their ability to pay, -- in a timely manner or even at all and they have been wonderful but when we had to close the building the Maze Care Center had to close. So, they’ve been coming two days a week and they’ll offer free Covid tests to anybody who doesn’t have the ability to pay. If they do have Medicaid or insurance, then obviously, they’re going to file for that as necessary. And they’re not necessarily volunteers but really what they do it’s as valuable as what a volunteer would do. So, people can still get clothing, can still get food, they can still get healthcare, and referrals all right outside our building. Which is pretty remarkable I think.

MB: May I ask what would happen if a homeless individual did come back positive within the shelter?

DS: If that happened, then if it was somebody that was in our care, then we would wind up quarantining them. Right now, what’s happening is if somebody comes outside to get a test then the community and I think that’s the county government has offered hotel space for people to go to quarantine until they know for sure what’s going on. If somebody who had been with us were to test, then what we would have to do is quarantine them or make sure they have a place to stay. And then be very, very careful and start to—well continue on not more very, very careful just as careful as we have been doing temp screens and verbal health screenings. “Have you been in a place where you shouldn’t be, have you had a cough, have you sneezed, runny nose?” all those things we’re checking for. So, far we’ve managed to be through this whole thing with only a couple of people who’ve tested positive and they’ve wound up going to the county situation; the hotel room that was available but nobody that’s stayed with us long term has had it. Which is remarkable.

MB: You mentioned the hotel, so you would consider the hotel a temporary space for these individuals?

DS: It would be. And that’s been secured by the county, I guess through government funding. I don’t fully understand or I don’t have a window on that. But I do know that -- one of the gentleman that joined my recovery program, a couple of weeks ago, took a Covid test and then once-- they gave him a place to stay because he was homeless. And then after he cleared they brought him back and let him stay with us to join our recovery program for men.

MB: Speaking of those programs, recovery programs, has those been impacted at all, for example have you have to meet face to face with individuals during these programs and if that’s changed at all?

DS: Can you say that again, can you clarify that?

MB: Oh, so sorry. Speaking about like the men’s recovery programs and the other programs there at Western Carolina Rescue Ministries have those changed at all?

DS: I’m very careful about who I bring. I have a quarantine room if somebody wants to come in and they have a Covid test but they haven’t cleared it yet. We have a room adjacent to my office that a man will come into, the doors closed. From the moment, he gets here to the moment we get a clear test, there is a cart outside the door that we’ll bring a meal to three times a day. Knock on the door they can get their meal, step in, eat their meal. They can come out for the restroom with a mask on at any time they need it but then shower time will be instead of the morning or the night it’ll be from 1:00 to 3:00 in the afternoon. When all the other guys in my program are otherwise volunteering, or helping out around the building. So, we’re really keeping contact-- basically eliminating contact. I’ll knock on the door a couple times a day with my mask on just say “Hey how are you doing, you feeling alright, everything well?” and then once we get a Covid test then they’ll go onto rotation with our regular guys but up until then we are very, very careful to maintain not just social distancing but basically social isolation.

MB: Ok, on social distancing may I ask have there been any other practices such as sanitation, cleaning, how have those changed--

DS: Yeah! Yeah, even back—I was thinking about this in the middle of a question just a second ago. When we began-before we even began closing down when we were hearing about was going on in Wuhan and other places. We began with Clorox wipes on all standard surfaces, on all table tops, on all doors knobs, door facings. Basically, on any place we felt like there could be general contact from person to person we began wiping down. Social distancing hasn’t been something that you know—when you live with people it’s almost impossible to social distance so we knew we were going to be exposed but if we’re ever out, if we had to run to Sam’s for a supply run or go to Manna food bank to grab food for a week. We’re obviously going to be wearing our masks. We’ve distributed-- I don’t even know how many hundred masks to the community but we’ve probably had multiple opportunities where the general homeless population-- I would be surprised if we haven’t offered at least three to five masks that are --can be claimed, recycled, reused to probably every homeless person we served. In addition, I think every man and woman that’s with us right now has access to at least to half a dozen clean masks at any given time. We’re very careful that’s all I know to say and we’re—when we serve meals all those meals are in one time use containers. Obviously, we would rather have things we can wash, reuse, instead of creating more trash but plastic utensils and plastic serving trays are just necessary right now.

MB: Ok, well according to my research you managed product delivery channels and customer relations in—the late 90’s with the Eaton Corporation in Birmingham Alabama. May I ask has that actually—has the experience helped you at all at with getting supplies or anything at Western Carolina Rescue Ministries?

DS: Yeah, my background is in—my education originally before seminary was in electrical engineering and I hired on what was Westinghouse, is now Eaton Corporation in their sells and marketing program. I would say the thing that I use most from that background is my problem-solving skills. Just looking, thinking through processes, thinking through the best way to organize things and work through the challenges that face us. I have not used those procurement skills to go out and --especially since Covid—to go out and win resources for the Rescue Mission but back when I began as the executive director of resource development I for sure used those skills on a daily, hourly, (18:27) basis. So, it’s all the same skills working with people, finding resources, paring people up with what they need and what they like to do for sure, did it every day.

MB: Speaking of resources and other things, I want to ask about the Thrift Store I noticed on the Western Carolina Rescue Ministries website, may I ask how that is handling the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of like gaining donations and making sales?

DS: When everything happened, we had to close the stores. One of those stores at least did not open back up. We’ve been very careful since choosing to re-open and we have a location over across from Westgate Mall --beside FedEx-- that has been what we call a “clearance center” where things that might not go in our [pause] in our regular retail stores it might go for somebody who would have kind of like to look a little closer to what we might have and find more discounted rates. What we decided to do when we-- when it came time to re-open it’s we totally retooled the stores and we obviously put up plastic screens, plexiglass screens for social distancing purposes. [pause] Then we decided to close all of our stores every Monday for disinfectant and we also turned the clearance center --instead of a store in a retail location-- we turned it into a sanitation station and a place that we could take old —we’ve always taken old clothes that can’t be sold and we bale them and sell them for recycling.

But the biggest thing we did with our clearance shelter was turn it into a staging location where everything that comes in from—as a donation from the community could be cleaned, sanitized, fumigated and we do that once a week for everything that comes in. And then we short it and then stage it to the stores. So, we’re much more careful than we ever were before. I really don’t know what other thrift stores like Goodwill and other people are doing but we’ve been very serious about making sure that we—we revamped our entire process to try to make sure that when we did open second hand stores, the thrift stores that we were giving people as clean an item as we possibly could

MB: Ok, that’s good to know and I also noticed on that same website page for the thrift store there was some graphic art there and I also according to my research you have also a background in graphic design. Did you have a hand in any of this?

DS: Not the thrift store this time. I used to work on the—a considerable amount of time on the old website that we’ve handed that over to a company that does. They basically do the overall design and then we populate the fields. We set the structure for all the mapping of the website the minutiae element but we just—it’s kind of a plug and play deal. I do help out with the bi-monthly newsletter that we’ve done for a dozen years. I do some work there, some interviewing of our clients, and some graphic design layout also.

MB: You mentioned a monthly newsletter has this been updating the community about what’s happening there at Western Carolina Rescue Ministries?

DS: It’s a bi-monthly newsletter. It has a few things that it does, there’s always a word from our executive director that’s basically a version or a paired down version of what he would share on our weekly chapel services. In addition, there is a client story that would have a number of-- a lack of better word advertisements of current events. Things that are going on, ways to volunteer, special drives we might be doing. Maybe we need an extra fifty pair of blue jeans or maybe we need sometimes it’ll be men’s and women’s underwear. Any number of things or shoe drive. There’ll be things that we want to focus on that we want to keep a good stock of. We probably speak to anywhere from—depending on the month and the season of the year—that’ll go out to about eight-thousand to twelve-thousand families in the community. In the Asheville area, we find it to be a really good way to share information and also for people that we need their donations to keep going.

MB: Speaking of donations do you guys believes you are being adequately supplied there at this point?

DS: We have been our donor base have been absolutely phenomenal they’ve been faithful through this ordeal. In fact, they’ve been probably more generous then we’ve experienced in the last few years because I think when people feel—themselves when they’re having to appreciate the basic necessities they want to make sure that other people can to. And when you’re stuck inside, there’s not a lot you can do to volunteer so I think even some of our volunteers have put their finances in play more than their time and for that if any of them were to read this or see this or hear this I want to them to hear us say “Thank you so much for what they do to make this possible.”

MB: Ok let’s see here [pause]. Let me ask about the-- I understand that at Western Carolina Rescue Ministries also had a annual Week of Thankfulness for the past few years and this year would mark the fourth. May I ask has any plans changed on how to go on with these holiday like events at Western Carolina Rescue Ministries?

DS: Obviously, until the governor were to change things we’re not going to be opening our dining room up. We’re being very careful with that even beyond whatever he would say our executive director is going to have to make some real important and hard decisions in the next few months about exactly how open “open” can be. I do know that the Week of Thankfulness will happen. Many of those special focus days will happen where we’ll able to give our clients certain things, care packages. Make sure they get a Thanksgiving meal though they might live on the street we want to make sure that they have some sense of normalcy in a time that could be very difficult for them. Every one of those days I think for the Week of Thankfulness there still would still be a focus. Obviously, that would be different for the people who but I do know that even now we are putting together some of the planning in the organization and even table decorations. So, that people feel like that they got a special day ahead for them.

MB: Yes, that is very important, holidays can help people out emotionally in terms of morale but especially during these times. Also, talking about planning I also learned—I came across what a code purple is in Asheville which like a massive cold front of weather is heading for Asheville and recommends people who need shelter to go seek that. You guys have any plans if a code purple is issued in Asheville?

DS: Code Purple’s interesting in the past what we would do is our friends at ABCCM – Asheville-Buncombe Community Christian Ministries— they would open the doors for men, and for veterans. We would offer extra space and these’re code purple always happens when we’re going to have freezing or sub-freezing temperatures outside. Obviously, we in the city and those who care about people want to make sure that folks aren’t—even if they feel they are more comfortable outside we want to give them every opportunity to be brought in from the elements. So, ABCCM would offer that to the men and to the vets, we would offer that to the women and children and then several other of the agencies in town like say the Salvation Army and the other guys for sure (26:26). They’re going to do things to help out, different populations to.

This year we’re going to have to look at it differently we can’t just open the doors wide open the way we did in the past and I believe we’re still working behind the scenes to build that plan. Yes, we’ve done it in the past. Yes, we’ve absolutely believed it as necessary and important we were on the frontlines of that at the very beginning of code purple and obviously when you’ve bring in people who may not want to bring in the building security’s going to be an issue. People who may be using, people who may be less than sober-- I guess would be the easiest way to say it--. We want to make sure that when you bring somebody in who’s not necessarily, fully competent or coherent we want to make sure not putting anybody else in harm’s way. So obviously the more the city could offer security for those nights it would sure help.

MB: Speaking of Code Purple about its unexpected influx of homeless individuals seeking shelter has there been any change in that in general, in terms of homeless individuals has there been an increase in them or if you noticed anything like that?

DS: I would not say that’s been obvious at all. No discernable differences.

MB: Ok.

DS: Meals have gone up. I will say that but in terms of noticing more people homeless no. Our food box distribution is remarkably high --I think-- last I heard we were distributing around a hundred-and-fifty food boxes a week. And that is, I don’t want to misspeak, but I think that may be thirty to forty percent more than normal.

MB: Can you think of any reason this might be, maybe because the pandemic may have cut off income for some people?

DS: I think that’s the best way to figure that out yeah.

MB: I was asking about the increase in number of homeless people and the income also to kind of combine those what is your opinion or—about the threat of eviction for some families and some people in terms of Covid and the threat of becoming homeless?

DS: We do not have [coughs] ‘scuse me. There may be numbers that you can find there with your research but in terms of being able to have access of that information we won’t hear a lot of that. People are not going to be very forthcoming about that because frankly people are proud and they don’t like to admit their need. Right now, that is not a piece of our outreach that we don’t really to know that information.

MB: Ok, that is understandable. Thank you for giving that information at least.

[Pause] May I ask if this pandemic has affected you personally or has the changes in the work there at Western Carolina Rescue Ministries affected you there personally?

DS: That’s a fair question. I think anybody who is being honest would say these have been some of the strangest days we’ve known in recent memory. [clears throat] I mentioned early on that our—a number of our program staff and directors moved into the building. I was one of those, adjacent to my office there was a storage closet we moved some file cabinets around in and set up a bed and I lived here for almost four weeks. Saw my family in the driveway and the back porch, socially distanced when I went to go pick up new clothes or went to go mow my grass. That was lonely, that was were some difficult days. Yeah, the --you asked personally. My wife’s an educator she works for the Henderson County schools and there were concerns you know school changes, what would job loading changes be. She works in the front office she used to be an assistant teacher, will she be needed, will she be necessary, will her job exist? Thankfully it’s all stayed in place and we have not missed a paycheck. My salary is paid because of the generosity of the community. We are fully supported by donations, there were days where we’ve wondered will the staff be able to stay intact, will we lose co-workers? There was a lay-off here, almost all those people were able to come back. Through all that I think I would be lying if I said it wasn’t difficult emotionally sometimes you know. Watching your kids struggle through wanting to go to school, my daughter’s a senior this year. Is it going to be her normal school year? It’s not close to what she had hoped for. So, you know is that directly tied to the rescue mission? No, but is it directly tied to Covid? Yeah. I tell ya as hard as it has been, probably the most remarkable thing is that first night when we told people “you’re not going to be able to leave here”—“well you can leave but If you leave we can’t bring you back in the next day” there were some people who were—from a mental health stand point they just weren’t very well and when we took away that consistency from them it wasn’t any fault of ours, it wasn’t the fault of anybody in particular. But they wanted to place blame and you have to let them place that blame, you have to let them feel what they’re feeling even if they blame you for something you can’t change. And there’s pain there, there’s wishing you could explain to somebody who is really struggling with their own mental capacity. Sometimes you can’t say anything to make people happy, you can’t say anything to help set at ease and when they walk away and you’re standing there left with no answers. It’s difficult, it’s miserable, that hurts on the inside, and if it didn’t hurt on the inside (light chuckle) I wouldn’t want that person working here! I want us to really care about the people that we serve. I really miss having so many men and women in our building where we can sit down and talk to them over a meal ask them about how they’re doing, see how you’re doing and that doesn’t happen with social distance. That doesn’t happen when people come to a table and pick up a plate and walk away. There’s an emotional tole that comes with this work, there’s an emotional tole that comes with Covid. My men in recovery used to be able to take visits to go see their families. They could take an overnight after-- they’ve been with us for two and three months they could schedule a night on pass or a forty-eight-hour pass and go see their kids, and go see their spouse or their mom and dad and I can’t do that right now. The most we and do lately is a day pass for about eight hours and that’s just not the same. If you don’t live in Asheville or if you’re family lives in Raleigh, it’s very difficult for them to work a trip up or come over from Morrisville for the day if they’ve got work. That takes a personal tole, that takes an emotional tole. But it’s worth it. I would rather have the difficulty of an emotionally engaged job than just be back in the market place like I used to be, It’s well worth the trade.

MB: Ok. Let’s see. [pause] May I ask for the exact address, location or phone number or any other way to contact Western Carolina Rescue Ministries? For anyone interested in donating or volunteering.

DS: Yes! Absolutely! The street address is: 225 Patton Avenue in Asheville, that’s 225 Patton Avenue, and that’s 28801. Our web address is: WesternCarolinaRecscue.Org. That’s one big long word that’s WesternCarolinaRecscue.Org. And the phone number is: 828-254-1529 and yes we would absolutely love to see people get involved and if they would like a copy of our newsletter those can be—the old copies can be downloaded from our website or if they would like to get on our mailing list they just need to ask. And we would absolutely love to make some new friends that way so thank you for asking.

MB: Ok. May I ask if there is anything you believe would be worth discussing or mentioning there at Western Carolina minist-Rescue Ministries?

DS: You, know I think your list of questions was robust covered a lot of ground so—kudos to you. I don’t think there’s more I need to add.

MB: Well thank you sir for taking the time for this interview. We truly appreciate what you’re doing there at Western Carolina Rescue Ministries. I’m sure the homeless community and the population of Asheville really does appreciate what you guys are doing there and all hope you the best on the future during this pandemic and hard time.

DS: Thank you those are kind words. All the best to you.

MB: Thank you. Good-bye.

DS: Bye.

END OF INTERVIEW