

Social work students to volunteer at Project Homeless Connect event

By Kayla Gaffney

A group of social work students at Southeast Missouri State University are giving back to the community by volunteering as guides at the fifth annual Project Homeless Connect event on Friday, Oct. 7.

This event originated in San Francisco in 2004 and began spreading to other cities, finally reaching Cape Girardeau in 2012. The event is being sponsored by the Safe House for Women and it is a one-day one-stop shop where homeless individuals can go to receive all kinds of services from groceries to haircuts to dental work – completely free of charge.

“People who are homeless or struggling with homelessness or just a vulnerable population that needs some services – they can come and they have a variety of things for them,” Dr. Dana Branson, instructor of social work at Southeast, said. “It also helps them network with other agencies that might be able to help them.”

The social work students at this event will partner up with an individual or family and guide them to the different services provided.

“They will come in and partner with a person or maybe a family, they will walk them around and help them out,” Branson said. “You’re kind of that person’s buddy ... it’s going to be very crowded, it’s going to be loud [and] some people have social anxiety issues ... social work students can see that kind of stuff in people and cater to what they need.”

Christina Clay, a social work student who will be volunteering, said she was not familiar with this event previously but is excited to be participating.

“Up to this point in the program, our practice has been role playing. We haven’t actually gone out into the community and worked with people hands on, so it’s the first opportunity for that, which I’m really excited about,” Clay said. “I didn’t even know this existed, so I think it’s a really cool service for everyone to get what they need.”

Branson said volunteering at this event will not only give social work students a chance to take what they’ve learned in the classroom out into the real world, but also to spread awareness about homelessness and poverty in this area.

“It finally gives students an opportunity to put some theories to work,” Branson said. “Another big part of Project Homeless is just awareness; a lot of people don’t think we have homeless people in Cape because we don’t see them on the streets like you do in a large town.”

Clay said she’s feeling positive about volunteering and is looking forward to working alongside her fellow classmates.

“We’re all really excited about it. I’m really excited about it, and it’s cool to do it with my classmates because we’ve been together for four years so it’s going to be cool to see each other working with people – I think it’s going to go really well,” Clay said.

Branson said she also is feeling positive about the event because it's always a good time for everyone involved.

"Project Homeless is an amazing day, it's a feel-good day – tons of services, lots of people are served, lots of connections for additional future services are made," Branson said. "It's usually a lot of fun. It's a positive atmosphere, it will be very upbeat – lots of smiles."