

My name is Mandy. I am “in the system.” I do not have a drinking or drug problem. I have no children. I have two college degrees. I was raised in a white collar neighborhood. Both of my parents worked until they were able to retire. I worked until two years ago, often two jobs at once.

What I am, is terminally ill. I am on oxygen 24/7. The small tanks do not hold enough; I pull a large tank behind me everywhere I go. I have had three heart attacks, and I have two stints in my heart. In addition, I have three heart diseases. Three of my four heart caths and one stint were done with no insurance. The pulmonologist and the cardiologist pulled me from working. At one point, I was taking 14 medications a day. My breathing medication alone is over \$200 per month. I went for 12 months with no income while applying for my disability from Social Security. This is actually an exceptionally short period of time, but my savings are gone; I have pawned or sold everything I had of value. I thank God for my friends. I was awarded my disability without getting an attorney involved; I was blessed not to have to pay an attorney.

I came back to Ashland in the first part of April. The move ended up costing far more than I had anticipated. I came back to town totally broke, with three tanks of air and a month’s supply of medication. I sincerely thank God for my friends. They have helped me to keep a roof over my head and have a bathroom. I feel that blessed is an understatement. I am on the list for HUD; I am not on the bottom of the list, due to my disability. Still, it will be at least three to six months before I can get a voucher. If I apply to places like the “projects,” I will be moved back to the bottom of the list. I am not happy at the prospect of waiting so long.

Getting the necessary help is more work than a full time job. No single place can help with everything. Due to the condition of my eyes, I cannot drive. Sometimes I have needed to walk 12 blocks to get help to pay for a tank of oxygen. If the first place I go to cannot help, I keep walking, turning my oxygen down from two or three to one: half of my normal oxygen flow. I have to be careful of the heat and humidity. I have always survived, and gotten to a place to get my air, and gotten back home. Many people are not that fortunate. I was granted food stamps, but because I do not have a car, or even a stove top, my purchasing is limited to what I can carry on a bus and what I can cook in the microwave. And I am one of the fortunate ones.

As an intelligent woman, a woman who refuses to use the word “handicapped” as a label of what I cannot do, a woman who needs the necessities only, I have found it very difficult to get the help and resources I need for things as simple as air, food, and a clean place to live. Going from 13th street, to 25th street, to 40th street, I think, “What if I was on a walker?” “What if I had children in tow?” What if I did not have a network of friends who have been so helpful to me?

Wouldn’t it be beneficial to the community if people like me could go to just one place for assistance? If using the Community Kitchen did not mean having to stand in the rain and snow? If a newly single mom can take her kids to get school clothes, get an outfit for her job hunt, and have a hot lunch without have to walk or drive all over town?