



FAITH IN ACTION

helping with homelessness

Faith in Action Merton Homelessness Project

Volunteer stories from the Drop-In

About 50 volunteers work with professional staff in the Drop-In. Volunteers are essential to the work of the Homeless Drop-In. It would be impossible to run the Drop-In without them, and their commitment is greatly valued.

These stories give examples of different volunteer roles.

Helping with online applications

David has a background in human resources and internal communication. Having retired from full-time work, he was interested in voluntary work in the local community, and heard about the work of Faith in Action through his local church.

I sit at a laptop and help service users write CVs, carry out job searches and apply for benefits online. I also look after the Drop-In laptops and help sort out simple IT issues.

I value the sense of being able to help vulnerable people in need, even if it's just by showing them respect and simple human decency.

Cooking meals for service users

Rob was invited to work in the Homeless Drop-In kitchen by a former Drop-In Manager who knew he enjoyed cooking.

The friendly team of volunteers work together preparing the chicken or meat and chopping the vegetables. One of us is lead cook for the meat, another the vegetarian dish, one more the dessert, and another couple makes breakfast for the service users. We choose the menu depending on what food is available and buy additional food as needed. We cook for anything between 50 and 80 people – or more – but we have an uncanny knack of always having enough and hardly ever wasting anything.

We all love the Drop-In, not only because we are needed and appreciated, but also because cooking is such a fun thing to do, for the camaraderie and the friends we have made. I really look forward to cooking on Fridays and even though it is often hard work, it is good work and we can all feel, at the end of the day, tired and happy to have done something so worthwhile and working with such good people.

Reception desk and listening to service users' stories

Anita is a retired social worker who greets people on their arrival, making sure we have their names and getting them through the door quickly so that they can eat their breakfast or have a hot drink.

I also have regular one-to-one conversations with some service users, as they quite like to come over and sit and chat for a while. I help serve lunches and with clearing up at the end of the day too. I also enjoy working with the other volunteers who all have the same aim of helping people.

Volunteering here is very rewarding, but also humbling. Every service user is an individual with their own story to tell, which can sometimes be hard to hear, but quite often heart-warming too.

It's really moving to see how service users look out for each other. If one of them is in distress, others are usually there to help – sometimes in quite subtle, unassuming ways.

Miriam has been a volunteer for ten years, and started because a friend was involved. She chose to work here because it is local and faith-based, and is learning about other faiths too.

I have always worked front of house, so this is where I can be most useful. I have also had training to increase my knowledge and skills. I really enjoy working with other volunteers as part of the team. And you always get a good lunch!

It is good to see people overcome alcohol problems, or learning to read and write. Getting accommodation is another high point, and being reunited with family is very moving.

Sometimes people come back and tell us that now their lives are OK and on track – that is very special to hear.

And there are smaller satisfactions every week; seeing how people enjoy their lunch and how much better they look and tell us they feel after a decent shower.

Turning their hands to anything

Richard has been volunteering in the Drop-In since he retired from his working life as a Supervisor on the railways six years ago. Richard explains that he was homeless when he first arrived in England from Uganda in 1972, and is now giving back to the community.

I do everything: looking after service users, giving clear instructions to fellow volunteers when they need this, sorting the clothes, working in the laundry and shower room, getting food ready and serving meals.

I enjoy the company of service users and giving them a hot meal, and it's good to see the smile on their faces.

For instance James feels so fresh and clean when he's had a shower and got some clean clothes – he keeps thanking me all day long. Tomas is pleased to see me and gives me a big hug – especially when I've given him fresh clothes.

I go home feeling good.

Christine has had a longstanding involvement with homeless charities, and after retiring she wanted a rewarding role.

I am always ready to fill a gap where needed, sitting on the reception desk, walking with service users to collect food donations for the Drop-In, doing inductions with new service users, helping to organise the showers, or distributing fresh clothes.

I value the warmth and friendship of fellow volunteers and service users, and increasing their trust.

Probably the most gratifying moments are when a service user arrives at the Drop-In looking tired and dishevelled, then looks so revived after meal, a shower and shave and with freshly laundered clothes.

Adult English teaching

Alice has been volunteering for several years, finding that it is a good way of continuing to teach while helping to care for her mother. Alice is a qualified teacher in Adult Education with experience in teaching 'hard to reach' adult learners.

The 'can-do', safe atmosphere promoted by the management team at the Drop-In is essential. I also value the advice, guidance and shared information from the other volunteers and the Drop-In staff. I could not teach without this atmosphere and the team support which is so strong here at FiA.

I love teaching challenging adults; it takes a lot of time, but when there are breakthroughs it's so rewarding for us all. It is frustrating at times, of course, but with the kind of teaching and life-experience I bring, I know it helps enormously and the students appreciate and value that.

A first step into literacy is often through telling your story or journey, I scribe for service users, and we use this material as a focus for language and personal extension, development and progression.

It's great when they take this step for the first time, having thought that study was beyond them. To see self-confidence and self-belief grow is the best thing a teacher could ask for.

Ahmed told me his story over quite a long period. He was able to take ownership of his quite harrowing life experience and it gave him a feeling of resilience and survival.

Kyle is a disturbed young man who just could not settle anywhere. We showed him the colouring-in books, and to our surprise he chose and coloured in a bunch of flowers. This enabled him to focus and begin to tell his story.

Teaching adults is quite different from teaching children, because it is a relationship of equals. I really understand the barriers to learning that homeless adults face, and what can be done to break down those barriers.

At the Drop-In, pre-learning (a form of trust-building) normally needs to take place before formal learning can start. Trust is key to learning – if you gain the trust of your students they will begin to see horizons and choices appear and widen, and then they can take charge of their learning journey.

To gain the trust of people at the Drop-In is often long-term, challenging and when it happens hugely rewarding. I have learned a very special kind of patience!

Polish-speaking support for service users

Krysia found out about Faith in Action via Polish connections, and finds it a worthwhile role having left work early.

I help with meeting and greeting service users, particularly Polish speakers, and identifying their needs. I have learnt a great deal about housing and benefits and health services as they affect homeless people.

I value caring about the people here, including volunteers and managers, as well as the people who use the service.

I have done a variety of different jobs in both England and Poland, and as a youngster had thought about being a doctor or a vet.

Now I have a better understanding of homelessness and its causes, and it is good to help enable people to see a positive way forward.

Maya works with Polish and other Central/Eastern European service users. Maya was born in Poland, where her father was a psychiatrist, so has always been aware of the negative impact that psychological issues can have on people. After moving with her family to the UK, she became a freelance artist and so had time for voluntary work.

Service users like to tell me their stories, and I've been able to develop good relationships with many over time by empathising with them and offering advice. I think they see me as a sort of mother figure!

I also help with the Polish-speaking alcohol support group at the Drop-in, run by our Polish social worker.

I sometimes use art in our support group sessions – we had great fun running a Jackson Pollock-inspired session, involving lots of paint!

I think of our service users as members of my family; there's so much warmth here it feels like I'm coming home. We had a Czech service user who was very alone and introverted, but over several months we helped with bringing him out of himself, and eventually managed to get him to successfully apply for the benefits to which he was entitled.

Being a volunteer at the drop-in isn't really about me, although I do get a real sense of purpose from helping even one person here.

Working in the laundry and shower room

Jo works full-time, and volunteers when she finds herself with some time off. Jo works in the laundry and shower room.

Rough sleepers need a shower so badly, and I help organise showers for service users – there can be up to 36 showers taken per session, so careful management is needed. particularly when more people need showers than there is time for. It's not easy turning people away.

I also ensure that the freshly-laundered towels are beautifully folded, which helps the service users feel valued.

I have seen from the service users how much they appreciate all we offer.

They come in wet and cold in the winter, or hot and sweaty in the summer and in smelly clothing; and they leave clean, freshly shaven (with a few splashes of Old Spice), and of course freshly laundered clothes (or in some cases donated clothes and shoes, as some come in with clothes and shoes which just have to be binned. Sometimes they even leave with a great new haircut too!

The service users are just so incredibly grateful – we get hand shakes, hugs and huge smiles which show their appreciation.

As a volunteer, I find this so incredibly rewarding. Working together as a team we help out our community, and we show the service users that they are welcome and we care.

Kitchen work

***Tiger** has been volunteering for a couple of years. He was receiving treatment for a long-term alcohol-dependency problem, and his alcohol support counsellor suggested that he would benefit from volunteering at the Drop-In as it would help give his life a new focus.*

When I contacted Faith in Action, I was made to feel so welcome by Andy the manager that I immediately knew this was the right place for me.

I started working in the kitchen, helping to prepare lunches for our service users, and clearing up afterwards. Although that's still my main role, I also enjoy talking to people who come to the hatch for breakfast and teas and coffees throughout the day.

Volunteering here has been a lifeline for me, and it's given me a real spring in my step. I am so grateful for the way in which it has helped me to rebuild my life. The other volunteers here are all lovely and supportive and I've made lots of new friends.

I've also been able to empathize with our service users who have alcohol dependency problems as I've 'been there' myself. I regularly volunteer at local Alcoholics Anonymous groups and have met a number of our service users at their meetings. I think they've found helpful it to see a familiar friendly face who understands something about what they're going through.

Every year Faith in Action take all the volunteers out for an evening meal locally to thank them for all their hard work, and I really enjoy this. We also have a summer picnic which is lots of fun!

Washing up

***Mary** comes in at lunch time to do the washing-up after 60 to 80 service users have had a freshly-cooked meal.*

I enjoy being needed, helping out and being with a nice crowd of people. It has become part of my way of life.

The Christmas meal is a big moment – certainly with regard to the washing up! It is memorable in other ways as well, especially for people who are a long way from their family, or for whom the Drop-In has become a substitute family.

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