

# Salem News You Don't Get in *The Salem News*

## An inside look at Lifebridge

**"The normalization of violence in and around Lifebridge properties is increasing."**

Several months ago, some neighbors and I met with an individual who is personally familiar with Lifebridge. To protect the identity of this individual, I'm using the gender-neutral "they," and not revealing whether they once lived at the shelter, or currently do, or worked there, or currently do, were or are a volunteer, or simply witnessed in an intimate way the goings on at the shelter. What they have to say will be shocking to some. To others it will reinforce what we have heard from current and former Lifebridge residents. In any case, it is at direct odds with how Jason Etheridge, director of Lifebridge, describes his facility in public meetings.

### Staffing

In response to neighbors' complaints that Lifebridge clients are hanging out during the day in Riley Plaza, the Broad Street Cemetery, and in the backyards of private homes in the GESNA neighborhood, Lifebridge's director tells us the Day Center is available to all clients. Our source tells us otherwise:

"The Day Center is significantly **understaffed**, with only two people: a desk worker and a case manager. At times it is so understaffed that if one or the other cannot make it to work, the building is shut down. The drop-in center on Canal Street is also understaffed, with both clients and employees complaining about a lack of people in charge."

Our source goes on to say, "In the Margin Street shelter, some workers are confused who their direct supervisor is. Some are unsure who the case management team answers to. And all the workers I spoke with have noted the understaffing." The longest tenured staff member, according to our source, is two years.

**Most last about six months.**

Etheridge has said publicly that he has difficulty finding and keeping staff. Perhaps the information provided by our source will explain why: "The staff is largely inexperienced and unskilled. They burn out. **The pay is low.** Most say it's not worth risking your life for \$16.50 an hour."

Residents of the shelter's housing units, known as Seeds of Hope, report that they do not always have case management services, as they claim their lease states they are offered. "Their most recent case manager was sent to the Canal Street drop-in center to work overnights," says our source.

### Safety

"There are concerns about Lifebridge's ability to ensure the safety of its clients within the facility. And as director Etheridge has said repeatedly, Lifebridge assumes **no responsibility** for the actions of its clients outside the facility, thereby impacting the safety of the surrounding community," says our source.

### Drugs

"During the day, Lifebridge clients can be seen **drinking and using drugs** in the neighborhood, including reports that a drug dealer sets himself up to make sales right next to Lifebridge's property."

**Reporter's update:** In late February, Salem Police **arrested 12 drug dealers** whom they said were supplying Lifebridge's residents with fentanyl, cocaine, and other substances. Our source reports that some dealing goes on within the shelters by clients themselves.

The source continues: “At night, the clients do more of the same behind the shelter, disposing of their alcohol and drug-related trash by throwing it over or pushing it through the fence, directly into a playground. Lifebridge is aware of this. Staff have talked to clients engaging in this behavior but have allowed it to continue.”

**Reporter’s update:** *In a recent meeting at the police station, in which our Ward 2 and 3 Councilors brought together residents of those wards with a staffer at Lifebridge, it was suggested that Lifebridge clean up the refuse left in the park by its clients. A staffer was subsequently seen picking up, but an Endicott Street neighbor finished the job as clients looked on.*

*Also, a local business owner whose building is located close to the shelter told me that its flat roof is littered with needles and other drug paraphernalia that users have tossed onto it. He has taken photos and says he has contacted the police.*

### Violence within the shelter

“A transgender couple reports they were severely **bullied** in the shelter for being trans. They say that staff either refused any assistance or disregarded their concerns. They eventually felt so unsafe that they chose to leave the shelter and now live on the street where they say they feel safer,” says our source.

“Another client was **openly assaulted** in the shelter over an alleged debt of money. The victim required an extended hospital stay due to his injuries, and Lifebridge ultimately decided that both the perpetrator and the victim would be thrown out. Let me repeat that: The victim was thrown out along with his attacker, because Lifebridge told the victim it could do nothing to keep him safe. If it happened again, at least wouldn’t happen on Lifebridge’s property.”

Violence at the Day Center is a **constant occurrence**, according to our source. “Lifebridge allows its clients to engage in habits that can escalate to violence on its own property, allows bullying that makes vulnerable people feel unsafe on its property—and when violence ultimately does occur, chooses not to intervene. Eventually it spills into the street. How can the surrounding community feel safe?”

Our source notes that clients using the drop-in center on Canal Street say physical violence is a regular occurrence. “The staff simply tell them to **fight outside**—‘outside’ being a residential neighborhood. There are no attempts to de-escalate the situation, no police called. I have heard that staff have threatened clients with violence, and one time a staff member even struck a client during a verbal exchange.”

### Violence in the neighborhood

Our source notes—and neighbors confirm—that violence in the vicinity of the Margin Street property is already a growing problem. “Lifebridge clients drinking at Riley Plaza get into fistfights. These fights have been moving into the neighborhood on Gedney, Margin, and High Streets. The **normalization of violence** in and around Lifebridge properties is increasing.”

**Reporter’s update:** *While most of the violence results from some Lifebridge clients or other homeless people directing their aggression toward one another—such as a **stabbing** in the Broad Street Cemetery last summer, or the recent stabbing death of two out-of-state homeless men in the woods by a homeless man who admitted to the **killing**—residents of the Downtown neighborhoods are uneasy. Many have changed their walking routes, while others now drive into Downtown instead of walk.*

*Recently, a young woman returning home to Prescott Street was afraid to leave her car. A man, high on something, began **pounding on the windshield** as he screamed, “Give me a place to stay! I need a place to stay!” Eventually he left and her mother escorted her into their home. And I have already written about the situation in which two homeless men **accosted** an Endicott Street **Senior Citizen**.*

*To situations like these, the Salem Police say, “Call us.” They will respond. Also, the police acknowledge that many homeless residents, both at Lifebridge and on the street, **possess knives**. While a knife may be a useful tool for camping, even to clean one’s fingernails, it is also, as noted, a potentially deadly weapon.*

## Area Issues

I'd like to expand on the growing **trash problem**. While drug paraphernalia is our greatest concern, with 40-60 clients in the shelter and an unknown number of unhoused people arriving in Salem every month, litter around Lifebridge and the surrounding properties has increased. Empty food containers, discarded clothing, alcohol bottles, and more (see box) can be found on Margin Street, Endicott Street, High Street, Gedney Street, in the Pratt Street Park where children play, at Riley Plaza, in the Riley Plaza parking lot, in front of the post office, and around the Canal Street overflow shelter.

"Lifebridge has barely addressed this," notes our source.

**Reporter's update:** Human **urine** and **feces** have been found in the yards of homes near Lifebridge, particularly on Ropes Street near the cramped overflow shelter on Canal Street, which offers only one bathroom for up to 60 residents.

"There is also **physical damage** being done," says our source. They cite actions such as shaving cream sprayed on the walls of a local store, individuals trying to damage light poles or throwing bikes into trees, or not so long ago, causing so much physical damage to the Harbor Walk that areas remained fenced off for months.

"Some Lifebridge clients, and others who do not live at the shelter but who have come to Salem because of the large homeless community here, have shown little regard for private property as well. Will property damage and trash become the new norm for our community?"

Yet another concern with Lifebridge clients is the **loitering**. According to case incidents involving homeless people, the Salem Police respond an average of 16 times a week to complaints that unhoused people refuse to move when requested from the property of a homeowner, renter, or business, or almost immediately return. And, notes our source, "Lifebridge clients harass passers-by asking for money or cigarettes, sometimes shouting inappropriate comments at them (usually women)." You may have seen or experienced this yourself.

"Every few months Lifebridge staff will address these issues, but after a couple of weeks of effort they give up and the problems return," says our source.

**Reporter's update:** Our source has not mentioned it, but neighborhood residents have noted numerous incidents of **public sexual activity**. This is a regular occurrence in the Broad Street Cemetery and has been seen taking place under the bushes at Riley Plaza during warm weather. Numerous residents have found couples fornicating on their property.

Additionally, **shoplifting** is a huge problem for Downtown stores selling food and alcohol, and in the local drugstores. Police are called when an individual is observed or caught stealing, but there are many unreported thefts and losses. What happens when Downtown businesses—conveniently located within walking distance for many Salem residents—close their doors?

I'll close with questions voiced by our source as well as by neighbors of the Lifebridge shelters and those in the neighborhoods surrounding ours.

**How do we balance help for a needy, and seemingly ever-growing, homeless population with the right of taxpayers, renters, and business owners to enjoy safety and a decent quality of life in the city where they have put down roots and maintain their properties?**

**This question should be answered satisfactorily—and issues resolved—before Lifebridge is allowed to expand.**

**Further, how do we stem the tide of unhoused folks coming into Salem? This is a burden that one moderate-income city should not be forced to bear alone.**

--Reported by Joanne Mattera with information from a credible source, May 1, 2025