

SLT warm room providing more than shelter

By Kathryn Reed

Homelessness has many faces, many circumstances, many reasons. It has only one definition – having no place to live.

It's expected to be in the single digits at 7:30am on Christmas Day in South Lake Tahoe. That's the hour dozens of homeless people will be turned out onto the street until the warm room reopens tonight at 7.

No one grows up with the goal of living on the streets.

A few of the people seeking aid from the warm room have jobs. They just can't pull together the necessary first and last month's rent, plus deposit. The scarcity of rental housing throughout the basin doesn't help.

Some no longer have the capacity to work. Mental and physical issues plague this population.



Steven Gurek is thankful to have the warm room for shelter. Photo/Kathryn Reed

For others like Steven Wayne Gurek, he is biding his time until after the first of January when his next Social Security check arrives and the price of a flight to Hawaii drops. The 62-year-old wants to return to the islands where he has family.

“Right now the warming room is doing me well,” he said last week while sitting at a bus stop a few feet from the shelter. (In the summer he camps near Fallen Leaf Lake.) The sun was shining and he was taking it all in. His next stop was Christmas Cheer to get some food.

Gurek said he used to work for Camp Richardson and Sierra-at-Tahoe doing maintenance. He doesn't explain what keeps him from working now. His bright blue eyes are those of a man with good memories. His rough, dark skin, though, is weathered, telling a different story.

This is the second year the Tahoe Coalition for the Homeless has operated a warm room. And like last year, the building is on a seasonal lease. The nonprofit would welcome a more permanent facility, even if it still operated seasonally.

In winter 2015-16, the room was open 102 nights, with an average of 18 guests per night. In that time 107 people took shelter for a cumulative 1,820 bed nights.

The 30 cots are available on a first come, first serve basis. In the 10 days the shelter has been open this season people have already had to be turned away.

Some of the same people from last year have shown up this year. There are also new faces.

The men and women sleep in separate areas. Mostly it's men in their 40s and 50s; the women tend to be in their late 20s through 40s. One night three adult women from the same family stayed at the warm room.

Families, though, are not permitted. If applicable, they may be entitled to a voucher for a week's stay in a local hotel. No one under 17 may stay at the warm room. No pets, either.

Everyone gets a Red Cross cot and blanket. Personal belongings are stored in a locked area. Clothing is available, as are travel size toiletries.



The eight cots for women are in what is also the kitchen area.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

Many came in soaked when it was raining so hard earlier this month. Some changed into donated clothing. The boot warmers were put into action. This tool is also used before they leave in the morning – a boost of warmth.

In the kitchen area are some basic foods like Cup of Noodles, trail mix, oatmeal, coffee and tea.

This is truly communal living. It's dry and warm. But then there's the snoring, people talking in their sleep, tossing and turning, or getting up to use one of the two bathrooms. Lights are off at 10pm. Lights are on at 6am. There is no TV. No shower. (Vouchers to use the city's recreation center are available and may be redeemed when no children are present.) Games are available, with Scrabble, Chess and Yahtzee the popular ones. Some people read. Others come in and immediately go to sleep.

There is nothing about the warm room that feels like home. It's not supposed to. It really is what it says it is – a warm room.

"We are stricter this year on rules," Nicole Zaborsky, THC board member, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Last year we allowed smoke breaks that were free flowing. Now there is one, which is monitored."



Guests on Christmas Eve were waiting more than 30 minutes for the warm room to open. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Still, it's not just a free place to sleep out of the elements that these men and women receive. Last season 32 social work appointments were scheduled for guests, along with 28 case management follow-up appointments.

This help last year led to five people finding stable housing. One person was even reunited with their mom. Another handful had found a place to live but were not able to keep it.

"Although the warm room will technically close at 7:30am, most mornings we will really be open until 8:30am to offer enrichment programming for our guests," Scott Weavil with the Homeless Coalition told *Lake Tahoe News*. "We plan to have two drug and alcohol groups a week, one Narcotics Anonymous group, one Alcoholics Anonymous group, one litter cleanup, as well as yoga and other enrichment activities. So, most days, services will be offered at the location until 8:30am. The police department suggested that we remain open later, and the stars aligned for us to make that possible."

Only Kindness, a group in Placerville, will be sending people to the warm room starting in January. They can help with securing free cell phones, work on more stable housing and coordinate with county services.

It takes a small army to make the warm room function. One

hundred volunteers were trained last year; they put in 1,600 hours. Another 88 people have been trained this year, with an additional training planned for Jan. 9.

A variety of jobs are available, but the most important one is listening to the guests without judgment.

The guests also have jobs – from helping with cleaning to making the coffee. They understand the efforts being made to make their lives a little more comfortable. Thank yous and gratitude are the norm. They are not taking this warm room for granted. To them, it's a present they get to "unwrap" every night.

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Notes:

- Address – 2179 Lake Tahoe Blvd., South Lake Tahoe.
- More info is available **online**.
- The Jan. 9 training is from 7-8:30pm at Unity at the Lake. RSVP **online**.