

Clock ticking to find shelter for Tahoe's homeless

By Kathryn Reed

The overnight low in South Lake Tahoe last night was supposed to be 15 degrees. There were residents who were outside, in a vehicle or in other substandard housing.

That is going to keep happening until the warm room is able to open. Now in its third year, the facility could open New Year's Day with about 25 cots.

The delay is the lack of a facility.

The South Lake Tahoe City Council took steps Dec. 12 to do something about this situation. The city owns a vacant building on Rufus Allen Boulevard that used to be rented by Unity at the Lake. A few improvements would need to be made to the structure first.



To help with warm room costs, checks may be made payable to Tahoe Coalition for the Homeless and mailed to P0 Box 13514, South Lake Tahoe, CA 96151 or go online. To get a list of what the warm needs in terms of

**donations, contact
tahowarmroom@gmail.com or
775.573.0822.**

But the main obstacle is appeasing neighbors who think these men and women are a threat to them and their children. A task force was put together to quickly mitigate concerns. Lake Tahoe Unified School District and Lake Tahoe Boys and Girls Club will be part of the team to find solutions because they have facilities within walking distance.

People are concerned about the proximity to a school bus stop, the recreation center, senior center, library, school and Boys and Girls Club. They don't want these people loitering or committing crimes.

The naysayers tried to paint a picture of these people being scary criminals. Statistics from the past two years show no evidence of that being a true characterization.

It was repeatedly pointed out that homeless people as a group are not law breakers, they are financially challenged. Some have mental health issues, some substance problems.

The warm room has an in-take form that asks if they are sex offenders. They self-report – just like they are supposed to do with law enforcement. If they say, yes, they are turned away. Guests must abide by rules at the warm room – like not drinking or using other drugs. If they do, they are shown the door.

Leigh Wayne Miller, a doctor in town, was one of the overnight workers at the warm room last year. This meant staying with the 25 guests overnight – alone. She'd do it again.

This week she saw three women who were admitted to the hospital, all talking about suicide. Miller said they all felt hopeless, were cold and didn't think they could handle another night in the elements.

“There is an empty building. We need to get people inside sooner rather than later,” Miller said.

Assuming a compromise is found, the council gave direction to staff to devise a contract. It would have the Tahoe Homeless Coalition pay about \$5,000 in rent for the four-month period, of which the city would then use those funds for its hard costs related to the operation. This would include utilities, possibly security and maybe a porta-potty.

The Catholic and Presbyterian churches in town have offered their facilities on an interim, short-term basis. But that requires some special permitting by the city, so it’s not an immediate answer.

“We are going to host the homeless on Christmas Eve. It’s an issue of humanity,” the Rev. Bob Kelly with Lake Tahoe Community Presbyterian Church said.

The homeless coalition is out of options. Barton Health has said it can’t help.

“Prior to the warm room initially opening, Barton Health was approached about providing space. Unfortunately, we did not have space to meet their requirements,” CEO Clint Purvance told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Lake Tahoe Community College will be asked about space. The college did not respond to an inquiry by *LTN*.

Of the 22 people who spoke at Tuesday’s meeting, the majority were in favor of the warm room at this location.

Bruce Cox, a 1976 graduate of South Tahoe High School, volunteered at the warm room last year. He spoke about how shocked he was to discover a classmate was among the more than 100 people who stayed at the shelter last winter.

Life has a way of turning bleak in the blink of an eye – an illness, job loss, addiction, mental condition – they all can

lead a person to not being able to pay his or her bills.

In a town where housing is in short supply – even the shabby hotels fill up on busy weekends. People can be hard pressed to find four walls and a roof. More than a quarter of the people who slept at the warm room last winter had jobs. They just couldn't afford a place to live.

Cheyenne Lane with Tahoe Youth & Family Services said six of her clients are in need of the warm room.

“These are young people working two and three jobs. They are sleeping in their car. One client is pregnant,” Lane told the council.