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Loveland homeless shelter effort likely to set record this season

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Because of continuous snow cover this winter, the House of Neighborly Service homeless night shelter has been open nearly every night and is expected to break a record for the season. How to Help

The House of Neighborly Service needs volunteers for the day and night shelters. If interested, contact the organization at 667-4939, ext. 25.

In past years, the shelter never exceeded 95 days of service from Nov. 15 to April 1. This season, the shelter already has been open 90 days. While snowstorms typically drop a few inches or feet of snow that -- with Colorado's sunny skies -- melt within a few days, that hasn't happened this year.

"It may be a warmer winter by a couple of degrees, but our snow stays around much longer than in the past," said Doug Ashbaugh, homeless shelter outreach manager for the House of Neighborly Service, 565 N. Cleveland Ave. "That is keeping me from closing, because that's a threat to life. Water is an extreme threat."

The homeless may be forced to set up camp on the snow, where a leak in a tent or a tear in a sleeping bag can cause the equipment to become wet, increasing the risk of hypothermia, Ashbaugh said.

Ashbaugh's decision to close the shelter is temperature driven -- 20 degrees or less -- though other factors, such as wind chill and humidity are taken into consideration.

He closed the shelter one or two days in early November and three days at the end of January, he said. Next season, the shelter might open in October and early November if necessary, he added.

Night Shelter

The night shelter rotates through 10 churches that agree to open their buildings for two weeks during the 20-week season. The House of Neighborly Service provides the cots, bedding and kitchen supplies that are transported by trailer, as well as arranging the meals from donations from the churches, businesses and the community.

To stay the night, the homeless are required to check in at 137 Connection, the day center at 137 S. Lincoln Ave., between 6 and 6:30 p.m. They are tested to see if alcohol is in their systems, and if it is, the staff determines whether they can stay the night, based on past behavior, tendency toward violence and other factors.

"Who we're trying to reach has alcohol problems," Ashbaugh said. "There is so much mental illness in this arena, and alcohol is the No. 1 medication to cope."

Shelter Statistics

An average of 22 homeless are staying in the night shelter this year, compared with 28 homeless three years ago, Ashbaugh said, adding that prior to the recession, the average was 18.

"The work we're doing during the day is bringing those numbers down," he said.

So far, 75 individuals have stayed at the night shelter, compared with 95 last year. Ashbaugh estimates that number will be 120 this year, he said.

"People are homeless for a reason," said Glorie Magrum, executive director of the House of Neighborly Service, listing mental health, joblessness and relational issues as the main factors.

Val Fisher, assistant manager and lead caseworker, said lack of education is another factor.

"We're keeping our numbers manageable. We're getting them connected to resources they need to get back on their feet," Ashbaugh said.

Diane Johnson of Loveland became homeless in November after her father died and her family turned off the water and electricity to the house in which she and her son, Paul, 21, had been living, she said. She didn't have the \$1,400 she needed to return the power, she said.

Staying at the shelter helped Johnson get over her fear of being alone, she said. She likes that she can trust the staff and volunteers at the shelter, she said.

"This is a great place," she said. "If it weren't for 137 and Doug and Val, Paul and I would be on the street."

The Outreach Center

At 7 a.m. each day, the homeless are transported back to 137 Connection, where they have access to a shower, day lockers and long-term storage, a laundry facility, mail service, a community area and a computer.

They are expected to meet with a case manager, engage in job searching and keep busy. They have access to a variety of resources, including therapies and treatments from the Larimer Center for Mental Health and the House of Neighborly Service's food and clothing banks.

The outreach center is closed during lunch, so the homeless can get a meal at the Community Kitchen or the Front Porch, which serves lunch weekdays through Christ's Church of the Rockies.

"They're not allowed to sit around. We're expecting something from them," Fisher said.

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Photo:

Diane Johnson looks Thursday evening for her 21 year-old son Paul Johnson outside the day shelter for the homeless in downtown Loveland. Johnson was worried her son would not make it to the shelter in time to catch a van to go to the night shelter.

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