

Shelters here get busy as temperature falls

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The worst parts of the day are after breakfast and after dinner.

That's when the places offering free meals close and folks who don't have a home often find themselves walking city streets — carrying all of their belongings, looking for a warm, dry place to stay or waiting for an emergency shelter to open.

"You are just on the streets," said one 46-year-old homeless man. "It's extremely tough."

Homeless men and women are looking for warm sanctuaries this week as a cold snap engulfs Lancaster County.

Shelters and churches are rolling out mats and offering beds. If the temperature drops below 35, one opens a lobby in which people can get warm.

Emergency shelters at the Water Street Mission are close to capacity. A church-run shelter program in Columbia has doubled the number of its residents since November.

A daytime drop-in homeless center in Lancaster city was buzzing Tuesday, with dozens of men and women sitting at tables, reading newspapers, playing cards, chatting and dozing on sofas.

"Normally, the cold weather and the snow does bring in the population that chooses to bear the elements when it's in the 40s," said Adrian Rodriguez, director of the Community Homeless Outreach Center, which operates out of the Water Street Mission at 210 S. Prince St.

One of the men sitting at the tables normally lives in a tent, Rodriguez said. But today he had come to the center to get warm.

"When it starts to hit 30 and below, we definitely start to see more people," Rodriguez said.

The temperature has hovered in the 20s for the past three days.

Around 120 people a day have come to CHOC in the past week, to sit in the warmth, talk on a telephone, take a shower, use a restroom and drink a cup of hot coffee. People also can get housing, health care, addiction counseling and other services at the center.

In the evenings, Water Street converts CHOC's room into an emergency shelter, with mats for up to 60 men.

Water Street also offers 90 emergency beds in a women's and a men's shelter, where people can stay for 10 to 30 days. And it offers a longer-term program for people who want to address the issues that have led to their homelessness and get back on their feet.

Just eight beds were available early this week in the emergency programs, said Water Street spokeswoman Maria Schaszberger.

"The numbers have been high since the first cold spurt," she said.

A revolving group of six churches in Columbia offers up to 15 homeless people a warm place to sleep, as well as dinner and breakfast.

It started housing a handful of people in November and now is up to nine people.

The cold weather and bad economy are driving people into shelters, officials said.

"The weather definitely seems to bring them in," said Sue Houser, coordinator of the program offered by the Columbia Ministerium and the Community Life Network. "I think this year it's very, very cold, and they are searching for a place to stay."

Residents are grateful for the warm place to lay their heads. The difficult part comes during the day, if there is no drop-in center and the emergency shelters have closed.

Homeless people go to the library, Laundromats or fast-food restaurants, Houser said.

"Some people don't like those kind of people hanging around, and that's the sad part about it," she said. "Some of these people are just down on their luck and happen to be homeless. They're not bad people."

The 46-year-old Lancaster man, who asked that his name not be used, had a job and an apartment until last summer.

First he lost his job. Then he lost his apartment.

CHOC has been "a blessing," he said. It provided him with bus vouchers, guidance, support and a place to stay during the day. He sleeps in the mission's emergency shelter overnight.

Not every program is operating at capacity, despite the cold weather.

The winter shelter program organized by the Lancaster County Council of Churches is only about half full.

This winter, the program takes just women and mothers with children, including boys ages 12 and younger, said Gretchen Lichty, the council's assistant director. The program targeted that group because of a growing demand.

Between 40 and 50 women and children can stay in the shelter, which rotates among nine churches. But the most people the shelter has housed is 17, and most of those were women.

The shelter was expecting to see more of a crowd but discovered that homeless women operate a bit differently.

"I think that women are more resourceful, especially women with children," Lichy said, adding that Water Street and other groups offer beds for qualified women who need them.
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