

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

## Coming in from the cold

By [SAM SCOTT](#)

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Friday, December 3, 2010 at 3:00 a.m.

It's been four months since Adam Murchison sought help after reaching the end of a drug-fueled spiral that left him broke and homeless.

His time living at Samuel L. Jones Hall homeless shelter in southwest Santa Rosa has changed his life, he said. He has kicked his meth addiction, saved money, and even started college, the 37-year-old fencing contractor said.

But the arrival of winter gives him added appreciation of the most basic part of the shelter — having a place to sleep after two years living in his truck.

"We all know what it's like to be out there in the cold," Murchison said.

Homelessness, of course, is a perennial problem in Sonoma County. But the onset of long, cold nights puts new emphasis on the issue and on local resources to deal with it.

Five recent nights of sub-30-degree weather — an unusually long stretch of freezing nights so early in the season — resulted in a spike in people looking for beds at another of Santa Rosa's shelters, Redwood Gospel Mission, executive director Jeff Gilman said.

For the first time in at least two years, the shelter exceeded its capacity and had to turn away eight to 10 people to other providers, he said.

"The last time we had to do that is hard to remember," Gilman said. "Cold weather makes it more of a life-and-death issue."

The mission has nearly 80 beds for emergency shelter, plus room for about 20 more mattresses in its chapel, he said.

The cold also prompted the Guerneville winter shelter to open Tuesday, a day earlier than scheduled. The seasonal shelter, which is housed in a church hall, can serve up to about 35 people.

"It was such nasty weather," said Jan De Wald, volunteer housing director for Community Housing Opportunities West, the group that runs the shelter. "All they want to do is lay down and be quiet and go to sleep."

The shelter is hoping to raise money to stay open past February. Last year, it closed the first week of March just before a torrential downpour.

Still, the cold is only a part of what forces people into shelters. At Samuel L. Jones Hall, there's been no major weather-related surge in demand, said Nick Baker, program director for Catholic Charities, which runs the shelter for the city of Santa Rosa.



John Burgess/The Press Democrat

William Harrold makes his bed before dinner on Friday night at the Samuel L. Jones Hall, a 120-bed homeless shelter in southwest Santa Rosa.

The real spike comes when heavy rains cause creeks and rivers to rise, flooding areas where many homeless camp, he said.

Weather aside, business has been brisk for more than the 25 years he's been working at shelters in Sonoma County, he said. Increasingly, the economy is part of the reason people end up on the streets.

"When you're living on the margin and your landlord is foreclosed on, it affects you," he said. "Low-income rentals are being snapped up by those who have jobs but lost their house. It trickles down."

Ruben Contreras considers himself a case in point. The Santa Rosa native was volunteering in the kitchen at Jones Hall on Friday, three days after checking into the center. He earlier stayed two weeks at the Redwood Gospel Mission.

A journeyman carpenter, Contreras said he lost his job in February 2008. After unemployment benefits dried up, he sank beneath the costs of living expenses and paying for medicine for severe psoriasis. He stayed with friends and family, but ultimately ended up with no options, he said.

"I'm just a man who went from being out of work to being homeless," he said. "If it wasn't for this place, I'd be out in the street."

You can reach Staff Writer Sam Scott at 521-5431 or at [sam.scott@pressdemocrat.com](mailto:sam.scott@pressdemocrat.com).

Copyright © 2010 PressDemocrat.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.