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Refuge from the cold

Homeless shelters serving capacity crowds as temperatures plummet

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Basics count when it's below freezing at night in Santa Rosa.

"Here you're warm, you've got food, TV, showers and blankets," Ashaley Burd, 20, said Tuesday evening at Samuel L. Jones Hall, a homeless shelter on Finley Avenue.

Burd was among the 92 men and women bedding down for the night in the spacious dormitories at the hall, a former Army Reserve Center opened three years ago as a shelter run by Catholic Charities.

Shelters in Santa Rosa and Petaluma were at capacity Tuesday as the National Weather Service issued a freeze watch for the North Bay, with overnight temperatures in the mid- to upper-20s.

Frigid nights with lows in the 30s are forecast through the weekend.

"This is a godsend," said Richard Gourneau, 47, an Army veteran who also checked into Jones Hall on Tuesday. "I feel for people who are on the street."

Gourneau, who is unemployed and says he is a victim of the recession, said he recently slept alongside the Third Street underpass in downtown Santa Rosa.

"I curled up and hid in the corner," he said.

Gourneau was wearing a new black leather jacket that he received from the local Veterans Affairs office on Tuesday.

"Christmas came early," he said.

Shelter officials said the bone-chilling nights put them in an emergency response mode.

"We're not turning anyone away," said Nick Baker, who runs Catholic Charities' Homeless Services Center in Santa Rosa and coordinates intake at four local shelters.



CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / The Press Democrat

Ashaley Burd sorts out her belongings as she settles in at the Samuel L. Jones Hall shelter in Santa Rosa on Tuesday, as temperatures were headed into the 20s.

Jones Hall, which ordinarily holds 80 beds, got renewed city approval Tuesday for a 15 percent expansion to 92 beds. The facility held 87 people Monday night.

The 40-bed Brookwood Center, the Russell Avenue Shelter, which houses up to 30 people, and the Family Support Center, with capacity for 110 people, all were full Tuesday night, Baker said. (Family Support Center has 130 beds plus Emergency Intake beds)

Mark Crow, site coordinator at Jones Hall, said he thinks Sonoma County is currently meeting the need for overnight shelter.

"But that need is growing, especially for families," said Crow, formerly homeless himself. Home foreclosures, mounting bills and job losses are putting formerly self-sufficient people on the streets these days, he said.

"It's bad," Crow said. "I don't see it getting better for a while."

The 100-bed Mary Isaak Center on Hopper Street in Petaluma had a full house plus five people on a waiting list Tuesday, and officials were planning to squeeze them all in.

"We are operating above capacity," said Mike Johnson, assistance executive director of the Committee on the Shelterless. "We stretch. We'll put mats on the floor."

There are "die-hard campers" still sleeping in cars and outdoors, Johnson said, but many of them seek shelter when the ground is wet and the air is freezing.

"It becomes life-threatening," he said.

County Supervisor Mike Reilly said Tuesday that the cold snap prompted West County Community Services to reopen a homeless shelter in Guerneville.

The shelter had been closed and not expected to reopen except for emergencies. Reilly said he expected the facility would stay open "for a couple months."

Santa Rosa Police and the Sonoma County Sheriff's Department said they had no reports of people breaking into unoccupied homes for shelter.

Burd, who has been at Jones Hall for almost two weeks, said she was getting help, such as job interview training, in addition to a bed and meals. Today she has an interview at a thrift store, a possible step toward getting back into her own home.

"This place is really cool," she said. "They're very welcoming people, and they don't judge you."

Jones Hall provides dinner at 6 p.m., cooked by resident volunteers, and breakfast to go in the morning. Curfew is at 10 p.m., unless a person works later, and the shelter's firmest rule is no disruptive behavior.

"We don't put up with BS here," Crow said.

The lights go on at 5:30 a.m., and residents must be out by 7. To help the residents rise so early, shelter staffers put soul singer James Brown's song "Get On Up" on the boombox.

"It's hard getting 80 people up and motivated in the morning," Crow said.

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