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Sonoma County shelters filling up

Few beds are available as cold nights make warm, dry place to sleep more than a luxury

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Tuesday, December 9, 2008 at 4:21 a.m.

Shelters for the homeless are near capacity across Sonoma County, a cause for concern as chilly temperatures drive more people to seek a warm place to bed down for the night.

In Santa Rosa, several shelters operated by Catholic Charities report few vacancies.

That includes the Family Support Center on A Street, the largest shelter for homeless families between the Golden Gate Bridge and the Oregon border.

City and county contracts with Catholic Charities allow the organization to provide a set amount of shelter services year round. But during the winter months, when freezing temperatures or floods are forecast, city and county officials allow the shelters to add up to 15 percent more bed spaces.

So far, shelter officials have not made that request.

"So far we've been able to juggle everyone in and out," said Nick Baker, who runs Catholic Charities' Homeless Services Center in Santa Rosa. "It seems to get worse when it's raining."

Shelter officials say the worsening economy, and not the weather, explains the current demand for services.

In Petaluma, the Committee on the Shelterless, or COTS, reports an 8 percent increase in the number of people seeking support from this time last year.

That includes a 300 percent increase in the number of seniors looking for help, said Mike Johnson, the agency's assistant executive director.

"That's a scary trend," he said.

He said the Mary Isaak Center is full with 133 adults and that some people are having to sleep on the floor while waiting for beds to open.

And the rains presumably are yet to come.

"If it becomes life or death, then we pack people in and we do the best we can to bed

them down and wait out the cold spell," Johnson said.

In Sonoma, The Haven shelter operated by Sonoma Overnight Support is almost at capacity with a homeless couple, three male adults and a man with a child, said executive director Bill Burrell.

He said these people do not represent the chronically homeless, but those who are temporarily down on their luck as they seek more permanent housing.

Burrell said he's fielded a number of phone calls from people seeking sleeping bags, an indication that some are not ready to come in from the cold.

"They seem to be bunked up OK," Burrell said.

Baker said more blankets are needed at the shelters operated by Catholic Charities. These include Samuel Jones Hall, an 80-bed shelter, the 40-bed Brookwood Center and the Russell Avenue Shelter, which houses up to 30 individuals and families.

"It's just always a worry when kids show up without coats or shoes," said Betsy Timm, director of communications for Catholic Charities. "Those people get priority."

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