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Shelters respond in cold of night

3 FACILITIES SAY EXTRA BEDS WILL STAY AS LONG AS THE WEATHER DOES

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Sunday night's freezing temperature chilled Gulf War Army veteran Al Barnes, who said he slept huddled underneath a piece of construction equipment parked at an overpass construction site in Santa Rosa.

On Monday night, thanks to an emergency appeal to increase the number of beds at local homeless shelters, Barnes had a bed at a Santa Rosa shelter.

"I don't like to be in a shelter but at least I'll be warm and I won't freeze like I did last night," Barnes said Monday.

City and county administrators approved an appeal Monday to temporarily add about 22 beds at three local homeless shelters to accommodate those seeking relief from cold overnight temperatures.

National Weather Service Forecaster Steve Anderson said overnight temperatures this week would be between 35 and 40 degrees, higher than Saturday's 28-degree low in Santa Rosa, but still uncomfortably cold.

At Catholic Charities on Monday afternoon, the line of people seeking shelter included both employed and unemployed, disabled and healthy, men, women and children.

"On nights like this, all bets are off. We do what we gotta do. I think people genuinely fear being out on the streets for the cold weather," said Nick Baker, who runs Catholic Charities' Homeless Services Center in Santa Rosa.

The three emergency shelters that Baker directs currently offer 150 beds. The emergency increase will make 22 additional beds available.

Shelters were filled to capacity over the Thanksgiving holiday weekend as nighttime temperatures dropped below freezing.

"We just crammed everyone in at Thanksgiving. A lot of people needed shelter because



Photos by MARK ARONOFF / The Press Democrat

Art "Cowboy" Hoffmann, 66, sits on his bed at the southwest Santa Rosa facility where homeless people can eat, shower, sleep and do laundry.

it was so cold out," Baker said. "We'll be cramming 'em all in until the cold spell snaps."

In Petaluma, two shelters with 135 beds run by nonprofit Committee On The Shelterless (COTS) were also full to capacity, executive director John Records said.

Records said he wasn't able to add more beds at COTS shelters, even though more people sought services in cold weather.

"We want to save people's lives but we have to do that within the requirements of what we're working with," he said.

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.

The county already approved one emergency request in October, when heavy rains helped fill shelters with those seeking refuge from storms.

This time around, extra beds will stay available as long as the weather stays cold, Baker said.

Barnes said he has been homeless for a month, after his camper was stolen in Humboldt County. He said he hopes to leave for Ventura County on Friday and wants to use his veteran and disability benefits to buy a boat and start a small business taking people fishing.

Until then, he'll try to stay at the shelter and off the streets.

"I can't stay out there with just my one blanket. And that's all I've got," he said.

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