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'You're going to be in my prayers tonight'

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Jessica Lopez couldn't have been more thankful for a bed to sleep in Thursday.

She spent the previous night shivering in a Wal-Mart parking lot with her baby and fiance, finally running out of couches to stay on following a fire that destroyed her mom's home last summer.



The trio seemed destined for another night in their vehicle Thursday until Lopez's sister brought them to Catholic Charities, which found space in its family shelter on Russell Avenue.

"You're going to be in my prayers tonight and over dinner," Lopez, 21, told the shelter staff.

She was lucky. Later Thursday, the shelter reached maximum capacity for the first time since the winter of 2010, the result of the cold and wet weather pushing more people to seek refuge. At Russell Avenue, that meant families sleeping on living room floors, though, they seemed glad for any place to stay.

"If it wasn't for the shelter, I don't know what I would do, I really don't," said Mimi Peralta, who was staying in one such living room with her two boys, 12 and 15. They were escaping a rental situation surrounded by drug use, she said.

It won't get any easier for homeless who don't have a place to go this weekend.

Rain and snow are expected throughout the North Coast on Friday. About 3-6 feet of snow is expected in the mountains, and the snow level is likely to drop to between 500 feet and 1,000 feet, and possibly down to sea level - potentially dusting Santa Rosa with snow. High temperatures will reach only into the mid-40s on Friday, and drop as low as a bone-chilling 23 degrees Saturday night, which would break a 49-year-old record low for that date. Saturday looks just as cold, but drier.

Clearly not everybody will be as fortunate as Lopez in escaping the cold. For the past two weeks, the Redwood Gospel Mission has been turning away around a dozen people a night from its men's shelter in downtown Santa Rosa, Executive Director Jeff Gilman said.

The charity offers the men sleeping bags for some protection, but there's just no room to bring them inside, Gilman said. The emergency shelter has 80 beds, all of

them taken.

“We are absolutely at capacity,” he said. “We're encountering turning a lot of people away and they're people who are a little more desperate and they are looking for something that might save their life.”

Bed space remained, however, at the Samuel L. Jones Hall homeless shelter in southwest Santa Rosa, said Nick Baker, program director with Catholic Charities, which runs both that shelter and the family center on Russell Avenue.

Baker, though, has had to ask city permission to temporarily bump up capacity at Sam Jones from 120 to 138 beds during the bad weather.

The expected freeze is providing another chapter to an already unusual cold season, said Duane Dykema, with the National Weather Service.

Some of the coldest temperatures occurred around Thanksgiving, nearly a month before winter's start, he said. Now the cold has returned with a vengeance later than normal. And in between, the region basked in warm sunny winter.

“It's been a pretty odd winter,” he said.

Barbara Rose, a Santa Rosa accountant, is someone who likes the weird weather. She's going camping at Point Reyes this weekend and would love to do so in the snow.

But she also knows it would be miserable to be outside without the proper gear, which is why she dropped off an extra sleeping bag at Redwood Gospel Mission on Thursday.

“I'm an avid backpacker, I know how cold it can get,” she said. “But with the right equipment you're okay. I just thought about those people out there that didn't have the right equipment.”

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