

## HOUSING

### **Homeless in jeopardy; Too few beds as overnight temperatures drop, raising concerns about safety**

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A homeless person freezing to death is a real possibility unless Red Deer gets more shelter beds, says advocate Tricia Haggarty.

With overnight temperatures plunging to as cold as -33C, demand for sleeping spaces at local homeless shelters is high.

But dealing with soaring demand is nothing new for the 23-bed People's Place, which has been running at capacity since the summer. Haggarty, executive director of the Central Alberta Housing Society, said five to 12 people are turned away from People's Place nightly due to a lack of space.

Many of these homeless people are out-of-towners who were lured to Red Deer by the city's hot economy.

"It's absolutely nutty... . The number of shelter spaces we have in the community is just not cutting it," said Haggarty, who is meeting to discuss the problem with representatives from the city and other agencies on Monday.

Overflow clients from People's Place are regularly sent to Inn From the Cold.

But the voluntary church-run shelter doesn't operate on about six nights each month.

When Inn From the Cold is running, homeless clients easily fill its eight to 12 mats.

"Sometimes we'll even give loaner mats if the churches are willing to take them," said Haggarty.

This boosts the bed count by up to four - but isn't enough to meet the growing demand for shelter space.

Homeless clients turned away from Inn From the Cold are directed to the Safe Harbour Society's mat program, which is geared for inebriated people.

Residential director Kath Hoffman said the 20-bed shelter will accept sober clients when there's room.

But staff face difficult choices, such as "if I take this person in at 10 p.m., what if a drunk person shows up at 2 a.m. with no other options?" said Hoffman. "It's a hard call to make."

When Safe Harbour is forced to turn homeless people away, these people are told to see if they can sleep on a friend's couch.

Haggarty knows several men spend nights at the picnic shelter at Rotary Park, where city workers always leave stacks of firewood.

These tend to be independent types who avoid homeless shelters - but Haggarty and Hoffman worry about what would happen if a less hardy soul is forced to sleep outside in frigid weather.

"Freezing to death is a real possibility," said Haggarty.

"Shelter is a basic human right, it's not a privilege," added Hoffman, who believes Red Deer is a growing community that needs more shelters as much as it needs more restaurants and stores.

Employers recruit from around the country. And these recruited labourers often arrive without money until they get their first paycheques, said Haggarty.

She's had as many as eight new workers at a time showing up looking for a place to sleep. "Holy Hannah," said Haggarty, it's a scramble. Ideally, she and Hoffman would like employers to help out with the accommodation crunch.

So far, no employers are taking part in Monday's discussions with the city.

Meanwhile, the opening of a daytime drop-in centre for homeless people, to be run by the Deer Park Alliance Church, has been delayed.

The latest obstacle has been a plumbing problem in the space the centre will occupy at 4611 B Gaetz Ave., in the basement of the Turning Point building.

Operating permits have to be obtained, but project spokesman Russell Janzen hopes to have the centre running before the end of the month.