

Upper Valley winter shelters kept dozens warm and dry



Anthony Crear, of Lebanon, boards a bus outside the emergency homeless shelter under construction on Mechanic Street in Lebanon, N.H., on Tuesday, Jan. 9, 2024. "I'll probably be staying here," said Crear, who is currently living outside. The remodel of the building began on Dec. 6 to create space for 12 shelter beds, two bathrooms with showers, a common area and an office. The shelter is expected to open the week of Jan. 22. (Valley News - James M. Patterson) Copyright Valley News. May not be reprinted or used online without permission. Send requests to permission@vnews.com. James M. Patterson

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LEBANON — Organizers of two new emergency shelters, which kept dozens of Upper Valley residents off the streets this winter, are reflecting on the season and sorting out how to continue the service.

Earlier this month, Lebanon's emergency shelter for homeless residents concluded its first three months of operation, during which it gave dozens of people a warm place to spend the night.

A similar overnight shelter in Claremont, which opened in January at Trinity Episcopal Church, closed its first season on March 14.

Robin Witteman, owner of the family-assistance organization, Baby Steps, partnered with Trinity to open the shelter after James Russon, a homeless resident in Claremont died in November at age 69 shortly after contracting hypothermia.

“There are two things that shouldn’t happen in life,” Wittemann said in a phone interview. “No one should have to die in the woods and no one should have to die alone.”

While the shelters were successful in keeping people warm, dry and fed during their stays, questions remain about where and how the services will be provided in the future amid the ongoing housing shortage.

The Lebanon shelter, an overnight program for up to 15 people at 160 Mechanic St., kept 53 individuals warm and dry during the 82 nights it was open from 4 p.m. to 8 a.m. Three-fourths of the shelter’s guests were Lebanon or Hartford residents, said Lynne Goodwin, director of the Lebanon Human Services Department.

Goodwin said she was pleased by the shelter’s usage, particularly for a new facility that opened in the middle of winter.

The shelter opened on Jan. 25, two months later than originally planned due to construction delays and a shortage of staff. The city spent just under \$169,000 to convert a former commercial building on the city-owned property into a shelter containing sleeping quarters, a common area, a kitchen for heating food, and an office for staff and client services.

“The city of Lebanon saw a need and stepped up,” said Michael Redmond, executive director of the Upper Valley Haven, which the city contracted to run the shelter. “They asked (us), who have expertise in operating shelters, to come partner with them and we were happy to do that.

The city budgeted \$210,000 this year to contract the Haven for services, which includes the upcoming months of November and December.

The only two year-round shelters in the Upper Valley are the Haven in White River Junction and the Sullivan County shelter in Claremont — which are often filled to capacity during winter months. Prior to opening the city shelter, Lebanon often had to place homeless residents in motel rooms at the city’s expense.

The total cost of operating the shelter for the season is still being tallied. Meanwhile, plans are afoot to reopen the shelter next winter, before a permanent emergency shelter planned for White River Junction is completed.

Most stays at the shelter were five or fewer nights, though seven guests stayed for at least 30, including two people who stayed for at least two months, Goodwin said.

Sixty percent of the guests were in the age range of 21-40 years, while 10% were ages 61 or older.

“The oldest person was 75 years old,” Redmond said. “She had been made to leave the motel where she was staying and had nowhere else to go. She showed up (on the shelter’s first night) and was there with the a couple of suitcase, waiting at the front door for us to open.”

Despite the shelter’s late start, the usage of the facility increased each month, from an average of four guests per night in January to about 10 guests per night in April — and 12 guests on the shelter’s final night on April 15, Goodwin said. The city asked if the Haven could extend operations past April 15, but several of the shelter employees had other job commitments scheduled, Goodwin said.

Hiring staff to run the shelter was challenging in part because the positions were temporary, as well as being evening and overnight shifts, Redmond said. Eight employees were needed to run the shelter, including at least two staff members per shift.

There also were 27 volunteers, many of whom were Lebanon residents, who helped at the shelter, such as with meal deliveries or spending time with the overnight guests.

“That was a real tribute to the community wanting to support this (shelter),” Redmond said. “Having volunteers there each night sends a message to the guests that they aren’t forgotten.”

Meals were provided on weeknights by Listen Community Services and on weekends by Alice Peck Day Memorial Hospital. The Haven contributed meats and other proteins used in the meals.

“The provision of food was a hit,” Goodwin said. “The guests really appreciated those meals.”

The Claremont shelter was completely volunteer-run, which the organizers said is not sustainable moving forward.

An average of seven to 10 people per night used the Claremont shelter's sleeping quarters, while additional visitors would drop-in for a few hours at a time for warmth or company, Wittemann, one of the organizers, said.

The shelter's volunteers provided meals and overnight monitoring. Several Claremont churches, including First Congregational Church, St. Joseph and St. Mary's provided monetary donations or volunteers to support the project.

Elizabeth Moriarty, a pastor at Trinity, said they are currently seeking a new building to house the shelter, as the church is not an adequate space for a seasonal or year-round program. In addition, they hope to partner with an organization that is experienced in staffing and running a shelter.

The eight hires by the Haven worked at the Lebanon shelter through the end of the season. Three of them are now working at the Haven's shelter in Hartford and two other employees said they want to return to the Lebanon program when it reopens in the fall, Redmond said.

The city is planning to reopen the facility in November, pending approval from the city's building code and enforcement department, Goodwin said.

While the state Division of Fire Safety allows for the operation of seasonal shelters in buildings without fire sprinklers for up to 180 days provided there are always two staff on duty, Goodwin said. However, the city's code enforcement department believes this may only be a one-time allowance, rather than an annually reoccurring use.

Deputy City Manager David Brooks said that city administrators will be discussing the permitting for the fall at an upcoming meeting with city departments and the Haven about the shelter's first year of operation.

The shelter's operating cost this year is still being calculated, though the city received numerous cash donations from individuals and community organizations to offset the total expenses of the renovation and program operation, Goodwin said.

The donations include \$50,000 from the Jack and Dorothy Byrne Foundation and \$25,000 from Mascoma Bank. In addition, Tri-County CAP donated tents and backpacks containing blankets, warm clothing, solar-powered phone chargers and first aid kits, while Partners to Promote, a substance use prevention program run by Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center, provided packs containing first aid supplies.

While the Haven plans to build a 20-bed, year-round shelter at 608 North Main St. in Hartford, with construction expected to start in the fall, that facility will not open until 2025 — so having the Lebanon shelter available next winter is critical, Redmond said.

“And even when that's up and running, Lebanon may still need to continue providing a winter shelter (or even) a year-round one,” Goodwin said. “Because of the housing crisis, the homeless numbers are still increasing.”

A point-in-time count in January by the city's human service office and Listen counted 47 people in Lebanon who lacked a permanent place to stay. Of those, 10 were living in motels and 22 were in shelters or living temporarily at someone's home.

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