

Tahoe homeless facility not progressing



Anne Schiller with Catholic Charities in Reno talks about what her agency offers homeless people.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

Another winter has gone by and still there is no place for the homeless in South Lake Tahoe to seek shelter.

Frustration is beginning to show among those who keep meeting to talk about establishing a warming room in South Lake Tahoe. Without nonprofit status, it is impossible to apply for grants that would help fund such an endeavor. The group doesn't want to form its own nonprofit and no entity has come forward to volunteer to be the umbrella under which the warming room proponents could function.

"We need to get buy-in from the people we want to serve. We need a vision of what we want to create," Marissa Muscat with Barton Hospital and Live Violence Free said.

Representatives from Catholic Charities in Reno spoke to the group March 24 about what they offer and some of the realities

of such an endeavor.

They were quick to say that the talking can go on forever and encouraged the Tahoe folks to jump in, start small and go from there.

Thirty-seven families with kids going to school in Lake Tahoe Unified School District are living in non-traditional housing. Thirty-eight homeless people were identified in the January count; a nationwide effort by the federal government to document this class of people. Throughout El Dorado County there were 247 homeless people counted that day. In the Truckee-Tahoe City area there were 51 people.

It was pointed out that not everyone wants out of this way of life. The Reno women shared how one veteran was given a studio apartment. When he was shown it he turned it down, instead preferring to be at the shelter.

Mental illness is one of the largest barriers to get people to change their habits.

“It’s surprising how many of these people have income who are staying in a combination of these shelters,” Anne Schiller, chief clinical officer for Catholic Charities, said.

Their overflow shelter, which operates during the cold weather months, costs \$24,000 a month to operate. It is equally split between Catholic Charities, the city of Reno and Washoe County.

Men and women are allowed – no kids, no pets. A mattress is provided for a few, but mostly they sleep on mats that resemble insulate pads for backpacking. One is lined up after the other. There is no privacy. But they are out of the cold. Most nights the 100 mattresses are spoken for.

This is more than most warm rooms provide. Typically they are just a building out of the cold where homeless must sleep on

the floor or stay up all night.

Linens are changed twice a week, a deep cleaning occurs once a week and spraying for things like lice and bed bugs happens once a week.

The hours are from 7pm to 7am. Bed checks and perimeter checks are done regularly.

Once a week case management is provided to help these people get services they need and to apply for aid they qualify for.

This facility is in addition to the regular shelter Catholic Charities runs.

"We've tried different things and they have not worked that well," Schiller said. "Before this facility we tried local hotels."

The problem was it was not in a great location, no staff was on-site to deal with issues and there was a lot of property damage.

For now, the Tahoe group is going to keep meeting, brainstorm and try to find a nonprofit to essentially be the fiscal agent.