

Shelters overflowing as snow returns

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GREENSBORO — Gary Gaither is all too familiar with surviving in bad weather.

He's spent the past few years traveling across the South looking for work — and sometimes living outdoors.

"I've been doing this four years — in and out of the elements," Gaither said while watching the snow fall outside the Greensboro Urban Ministry on Tuesday afternoon.

"Rain, snow. It's not a happy thing."

The Urban Ministry is sheltering large numbers of homeless people during one of the harshest winters in recent memory.

The nonprofit reported 161 women and men stayed Monday night at its year-round shelter, the Weaver House. The Rev. Mike Aiken, executive director of Urban Ministry, said about 60 of them slept on mats on the floor.

About 8 p.m. Tuesday, Urban Ministry reported 130 women and men staying at the shelter, with 30 to 40 sleeping on the floor. And people were still coming in.

Under normal conditions, Weaver House prepares for 30 to 40 overflow residents, Aiken said.

"I'm hoping for two good things," he said. "It's going to get warmer and a lot of people get Social Security checks (around the first of the month). That helps them a lot of times. They can go out and pay for a room and not need the facilities."

Urban Ministry opened winter emergency shelters last year at seven area churches. They are also full.

"What I observe is that we have a more steady census each night," said Sheron Sumner, director of the winter emergency shelters. "We average probably somewhere between 100 to 107 people each night."

Sumner said residents at the emergency sites get dinner, breakfast and their own cot. They also receive informal assistance from volunteers who help them access the services they need to get on their feet.

"They are fed and loved and taken good care of," Sumner said.

The emergency shelters will close April 1, and Sumner said her staff is busy trying to find clients permanent homes. "We won't be able to place all of them, but we will be able to help some."

Each winter emergency site can house 10 to 20 people, but Aiken packs every available space of the Weaver House and turns no one away.

Gaither, who's had a bed at the Weaver House for about a month, likens it to living at a luxury resort. "It's great. I'm not in the streets. They feed us every day. I can take a shower at night."

Amanda Gary secured a bed at the Weaver House on Feb. 12 after living outdoors and with friends off and on. Her husband can't get a bed until April and has been living there as an overflow resident, she said.

"He does not like it," she said. "He can't get no sleep. They (other residents) keep him up all night basically running their mouths."

Several residents sat in the commons area after lunch Tuesday. Some wore full winter gear, coats zipped up to their necks and hoods covering their heads. They read, chatted or slept with their heads on tables.

Others attended worship service, where Chaplain Frank Dew told them, "It may be snowing outside, but we've got warmth inside."

Still, there are some the Urban Ministry can't reach. Aiken said hard-core homeless people value their freedom and would rather live on the streets than abide by the rules of the shelters.

He attributes that attitude in many homeless people to severe mental illness. Aiken said more counseling and other services could help bring them off the streets.

Urban Ministry is working with Partners Ending Homelessness to offer this kind of support and eliminate homelessness.

"Greensboro Urban Ministry is a place where ending homelessness begins," Aiken said. "I'd like to work myself out of a job."

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