

## **Volunteers prepare to help at shelters**

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GREENSBORO — It takes a lot of volunteers — too many to count — to help out at the winter emergency shelters for the homeless at area churches.

Volunteers help cook meals, check participants in and monitor the shelter overnight.

“There’s so many things they can do,” said Sheron Sumner, director of the winter emergency shelters.

Organizers were pleased at the turnout for a recent volunteer training session, Sumner said. About 130 people attended the session on volunteering at the seven shelters, which will be open Dec. 1 through April 1.

The 90-minute training included an overview of the winter emergency shelter program and information on homelessness, such as the emotional impact it has on people and statistics for Greensboro.

These shelters, a response to an expected shortage of emergency shelter for the second winter in a row, will house 10 to 20 people each, Sumner said.

The church- and community-based winter emergency shelters were created last year because the recession left more people seeking help than could be accommodated in traditional shelters.

These shelters differ from the traditional ones at the Salvation Army’s Center of Hope and Urban Ministry’s Weaver House, which lay down extra mats in their lobbies each winter for anyone who shows up.

The church-based sites are assigned a set number of participants, who are expected to stay at the same site throughout the program.

Each site has a full-time person who stays overnight. But churches provide additional volunteers, food and supplies. This year, the church-based shelters plan to start earlier on helping participants find permanent housing and jobs, officials have said.

Volunteers come from various walks of life. Some former participants are returning to volunteer this year, Sumner said.

Some volunteers, such as George Harris, are back for a second year.

“It’s something God was telling me to do. The more I did it, the more it grew on me. It became one of my highest priorities,” said Harris, who helped out at Mount Zion’s shelter last winter.

Twice a week he drove a van to transport men who stayed at the shelter.

“When this came along, it changed my days,” said Harris, who is director of customer service for UnitedHealthcare. “I had to be there at 6 o’clock to drive the van to pick people up at Urban Ministry.”

But the extra hours — 10- to 12-hour days including work — were worth it, he said.

“You get more out of it than the residents or participants do,” Harris said. “You see similarities in emotions you share, similarities in backgrounds, because they didn’t grow up homeless.”

*Staff writer Eddie Wooten contributed to this report.*

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