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Volunteer Liz Finch serves lasagna to Safe Space Winter Shelter guests earlier this week at Faith Lutheran Church.
PHOTO BY ASHIAH SCHARAGA

Closure imminent

Safe Space turns to community to find a facility, avoid closing the shelter early

Michael Riggs became homeless after his wife died in early 2018. His income alone wasn't enough to pay the bills. With nowhere else to go, he turned to Chico's Safe Space Winter Shelter.

On a recent evening at Faith Lutheran Church, the rotating shelter's location for the week, he reflected on the past two years and what the nonprofit organization and its volunteers mean to him. Riggs has been able to find temporary housing off and on, but securing something long-term has proved more difficult. That's why he's once again turned to Safe Space.

Riggs says the organization has helped him regain his pride and hope for the future.

"They're so loving," he told the CN&R, tears welling. "I'm filled with tears because I'm so happy they care. It's one of the best things in my life to see that kind of love is still around."

That same night, as guests arrived, some set up their sleeping pads and rested. Others enjoyed live music while grabbing dinner—lasagna and garlic bread, dished up by smiling volunteers Liz Finch and Janet Brennan. Dan Joseph, supervisor of the shelter's setup that evening, was on hand to troubleshoot any issues, but also helped guests get toiletries and listened to those who just needed to vent.

Operations-wise, it was a typical night. But it's been an unusual year for Safe Space, which is facing a "crisis of scheduling," facilities team leader Deanna Schwab told the CN&R. Safe Space has historically operated seasonally, rotating from church to church, week to week. This year, for the first time in its six-year history, it may have to close for two weeks mid-season, Schwab said: As of deadline, the organization had no locations lined up for Feb. 2-9 and March 1-8.

Safe Space had intended to open a permanent,

24-hour low-barrier location last year. When that didn't come together, organizers fell behind, scrambling to find locations. Many churches that have opened their doors in years past had already solidified their calendars. The nonprofit is now reaching out to the public and its community partners for help finding places to fill those gaps, and time is of the essence.

The shelter always has had a seasonal end date. But a closure mid-winter is not ideal for the people it serves, Schwab said. The approximately 60 folks who stay there each night include seniors with disabilities—some use wheelchairs or walkers—as well as families with infants, added Angela McLaughlin, Safe Space's board president.

"What we do now is the most simple goal of we don't want any people to die of exposure if we can help it," she said.

Six homeless people were found dead on the streets of Chico in 2019, and that doesn't include those who experienced a medical emergency and died later at a hospital. That fear is real for those Safe Space serves. Take Brian Lutzow. He uses a wheelchair and suffers from myriad health issues, he said, including kidney failure and diabetic retinopathy. In December he was sleeping on the cold concrete of the City Plaza, and told the CN&R he was so sick he wasn't sure how much longer he'd live.

Since Safe Space opened, Lutzow has been at the shelter nearly every night. He said this has lessened the severity of his health issues.

"I was really sick for a while," Lutzow said. "Being able to come in here at night, being out of the cold, it saves your skin."

Safe Space first started searching for locations for a permanent shelter after the Camp Fire. But its first proposal, the Orange Street Shelter, fizzled after concerns from the community led to a key partner, the Jesus Center, backing out last spring. The \$1.45 million in funding earmarked for the project—\$1 million from the Walmart Foundation and \$450,000 from the state's Homeless Emergency Aid Program (HEAP)—

Reach out:
Have a location proposal for Safe Space? Email Deanna Schwab at deanna@safespacechico.org.

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