



The Tahoe Coalition for the Homeless runs the only overnight shelter in the Tahoe Basin. It's open every night from December through April. COURTESY/TAHOE COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS

Inside story

The warm room

Internet photos of glorious powder days

and sunny skiing on the edges of legendary Lake Tahoe motivate droves of tourists to make the trek to South Lake Tahoe hoping to make their own alpine memories. They may carry on with frivolity and lavishness without noticing some of the most vulnerable people living in this extreme mountain climate.

"Housing is tentative for a lot of people," said Nicole Zaborsky of the Tahoe Coalition for the Homeless. The organization operates a nightly "warm room" for people needing a safe, clean bed during the coldest months in the Sierras.

Zaborsky said homelessness is not just an urban problem. In South Lake Tahoe, homelessness might result from lack of employment during the slow season. Any number of factors may be at play, and both younger and older residents can struggle in the expensive housing market that's inundated with luxury rental platforms. Spending the night outside at 6,200 feet above sea-level can be life-threatening.

The "warm room" is open every night from 6 p.m. to 7 a.m., December to April. Anyone over 18 years old is welcome, as are service animals. There are 26 foldable mattresses and bunk beds. Light food and beverages are stocked. Though they do not offer full meals, the coalition can point their guests toward other local services, including food services, showers and health care.

According to Zaborsky, the warm room typically helps over 150 individuals in a given year.

"Typically folks stay 30 days. That's our median number," she said. "That could mean that they need to save up money for first and last to get into long-term housing. It could mean they connect with family in another community, and we help them

get transportation hooked up to get to that location. And it could mean, in a few cases, getting into rehab. Sometimes it's students who need to work out a roommate situation or a family situation."

Beyond simply giving people a place to stay, the Tahoe Coalition for the Homeless can also help people understand the steps they'll need to take to get into long-term housing. Zaborsky said staff and volunteer social workers discuss every individual's goals. They may address substance abuse or health care needs. They're also happy to help with rental applications.

After talking with a social worker upon intake, guests often socialize together—playing games, sharing food and chatting. Over time, Saborsky said, close bonds develop among the staff, volunteers and guests. Everyone participates in chores like vacuuming, toilet cleaning, and taking out the garbage so there's a sense of community and ownership.

"Most of our guest are locals," said Zaborsky, "I think there's a myth out there that the shelter in Tahoe will be somehow different [from other shelters]. The fear of some is that 'if you build it, they will come'—that a shelter will somehow attract more homeless, and we've found that not to be true. We've found that 86 percent of our guests were living in this zipcode when they became homeless."

The coalition hosts an open house on Feb. 7 at its location at 1201 Emerald Bay Road. The community is invited to bring donations of blankets and light snacks and tour the warm room between 3 to 6 p.m. A reception will be held next door at Ernie's Coffee Shop with refreshments.

"It's a way to thank the community for their support, and this year we'll be thanking the first responders in the community," Zaborsky said. "They're the eyes and ears." □

Learn more about the Tahoe Coalition for the Homeless and its warm room open house event here: <https://bit.ly/2RF5Das>.

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