



Homelessness can be lethal in areas with serious snow.

Snowbound

Helping the homeless in winter

Being homeless is tough. Being homeless in Tahoe—where February temperatures dipped as low as minus-13 degrees—can be deadly.

Among the main factors contributing to homelessness in the Lake Tahoe region is job instability. For employees in the resort industry, job stability wavers at the mercy of the weather. “We see a lot of people who have steady income, say, now, because there’s a lot of snow, and it’s winter,” said Nicole Zaborsky with the Tahoe Coalition for the Homeless. “Come a month from now or two months from now, their hours are dwindling. And the next summer season job hasn’t kicked in yet either.”

The high cost of living is also a factor. Zaborsky’s group runs a temporary shelter in South Lake Tahoe, and she said the some of the shelter’s guests are on social security or disability, and are hard-pressed to afford a rental—even a shared one. In South Lake Tahoe, a one-bedroom apartment averages \$926.

“Right now, the current median home price for the Lake Tahoe region is \$490,500,” wrote Heidi Hill Drum from the Tahoe Prosperity Center in a 2018 blog post. “To buy a house at that price, your income needs to be \$103,817. In Tahoe City, you need to make \$118,000 and in Incline Village, you’ll need an income of \$194,000

a year to buy the median priced home.” She and other housing activists have pointed out this makes local housing largely inaccessible to Tahoe’s recent college graduates, teachers, police officers and fire fighters.

In addition to the Zaborsky coalition, a few other groups are working on aiding Tahoe homeless and those in need of low-income housing, both short and long term.

A group called Lake Tahoe is United For Action runs the Emergency Warming Shelter, an additional temporary shelter in Truckee, which opens on days when the weather reaches emergency conditions. Last winter, it was open 40 days.

“The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency as well as many other agencies in the region are considering changes or have already begun to implement changes that encourage more moderate to low-income housing in the area,” said TRPA’s Karen Fink in an email. Saint Joseph Community Land Trust has an initiative to help people living in motels transition to permanent housing. Tahoe Home Connection encourages second homes owners to rent them out as long-term or seasonal workforce housing, and a North Shore group called Mountain Housing Council similarly urges long-term rentals of vacation homes.

While various groups pursue long-term solutions to getting people housed, the short-term need is pressing. On a given night during the summer, said Zaborsky, many people sleep outside on public lands. In winter, that becomes too dangerous. But the four year old Warm Room only sleeps 28 people, and Truckee’s shelter sleeps 16.

“Before the Warm Room, a large portion of the homeless population would leave the Tahoe Basin because there were no services,” said South Lake Tahoe Police Chief Brian Uhler in an email.

People seeking shelter sometimes contact his department—or sometimes, Barton Memorial Hospital—to ask for help. Uhler doesn’t have exact stats, but he estimates that his office receives two to three such calls a week.

Before the shelter existed, South Lake Tahoe officers would sometimes request aid from churches. “At one time, our Police Association even sponsored helping pay for motel rooms for some homeless/trapped-in-the-basin people,” Uhler said.

“We have been lucky to have no homeless deaths as a result of winter weather exposure this year, or in the eight years I’ve been serving as the chief,” he said. □

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