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El Dorado County has no winter homeless shelter

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Krystal Reyes doesn't know where she and her baby daughter will sleep tonight.

Friday the 23-year-old sat in a Placerville motel with 1-year-old Ruby, hoping they would not have to join the people huddled in tents and makeshift shelters on a hill behind the rundown lodge.

There are hundreds more sleeping in the woods or beneath underpasses and bridges in El Dorado County.

A homeless count this year showed that 164 people in April and 108 people in September were homeless or staying in transitional housing in the county. But the report acknowledged that was an undercount. It cited the difficulty of locating people not staying in a shelter or in transitional housing.

"Encampments are especially hard to locate in the summer months when people go deeper in the forest," the report said.

Reyes would like to avoid sleeping outdoors, but she can't go to a homeless shelter. There isn't one in El Dorado County.

Grace Place, run by United Outreach of El Dorado at the Camino Seventh-day Adventist Church, had provided a warm place to sleep during the winter for three years, but the need outgrew the facility and it closed in May.

"There were too many folks," said Art Edwards, president of the Placerville-based nonprofit group.

Edwards said there will be no shelter this winter. Instead, he and a group of volunteers are putting together packages filled with tents, sleeping bags, food, underwear and toiletries donated from local businesses. The packages will be distributed at a Placerville park where the homeless gather.

Edwards said he hopes this will be enough.

Temperatures on the western slope of the county can dip as low as 26 degrees in winter.

He's afraid some of the homeless may meet the fate of Susan Mobley, a 48-year-old woman who died while sleeping in a Placerville park in March. He said she froze to death.

"I'm afraid that's what will happen this winter," Edwards said. "There's nothing we can do about it at this moment."

Things could be better next year if the county accepts a \$1.47 million grant offered by the state to start a shelter. Once the county receives and accepts the contract for the community block grant, it will have 90 days to be either in a lease or in escrow on a facility, said Mike Applegarth, county spokesman.

The county applied for the grant on behalf of United Outreach, which will run the facility. County officials expect the organization to find funding to keep the shelter going after the grant runs out in 2011.

At the direction of the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors, the shelter will include a job training program and other services. Four to five full-time employees will serve as case managers.

After visiting about 20 potential sites for the shelter, a committee is focusing on two. Joyce Aldrich, a county program manager, would say only that one site is in the Placerville vicinity and that one is more rural. A Pollock Pines site, unpopular with neighbors, is no longer on the table.

Clients of the new shelter will have strict rules, said Edwards. Anyone who checks into the facility won't be able to leave unless it's for a specific appointment or for work. Punishment for breaking the rules will be expulsion.

Edwards predicted it will take 90 to 120 days for someone to go through the program.

Once this shelter is up and running on the west slope of the county, Edward said the organization plans to open another in South Lake Tahoe, "where they have a tremendous homeless problem."

The shelters can't come soon enough.

"We're convinced that the homeless population is going to go through the roof in the county, if it hasn't already," Edwards said.

He said school officials have alerted the organization to an "unbelievable increase in the number of folks that are losing their homes," many because of foreclosure.

Veterans also are increasingly becoming homeless. Edwards said 20 percent of the homeless clients are veterans, most from Iraq.

"It breaks my heart to see these young men wandering around with mental health issues," he said.

A shelter also would help Barbara and Royce Sleeth, 71 and 70, respectively, who sleep "in a safe spot in town." Tuesday they were eating a meal of pork stew at the Upper Room Dining Hall in Placerville run by the Catholic Community of St. Patrick.

The couple stopped knowing where they would sleep each night 17 years ago, when they abandoned a broken down mobile home with no heat. They ran out of money for a hotel and started sleeping in their car. In June, police towed the car.

Elly Kozlowski, director of the Upper Room, said about 30 percent of the diners there are homeless; the rest are low-income or just lonely. Volunteers provide an average of 120 meals – including to-go bags – each day.

The homeless who gather in the dining hall have more in common than a lack of shelter. Most have family members unable or unwilling to help them. Almost all can tick off the locations of homeless encampments – Sly Park Lake, Grizzly Flats, Green Valley Road and one near the county fairground. All agree there are few resources for them in the county.

The county's Aldrich acknowledged that resources for the county's homeless are limited. She said, however, that the grant "is a positive step in the right direction."

Edwards agreed that the county has come a long way.

"We went for so long with everyone in the county denying there was a homeless problem," Edwards said. "Three years ago when we started, they said we were crazy. A lot of people were wishful thinking or denying. That has changed."

Call The Bee's Diana Lambert, (916) 478-2672.