

Homeless shelter serving fewer people than last year

Resources for the homeless and hungry in Aspen are expanding this winter, while the number of people taking advantage of them has fallen from the heightened demand of a year ago.

A total of 25 different people have taken advantage of the overnight shelter in St. Mary Catholic Church on Main Street since it opened last month, according to Kris Marsh of the Aspen Valley Medical Foundation, and about 10 people are staying there nightly. Last year at this time, Marsh said, there were consistently twice as many people sleeping there.

Last winter, as the recession was first taking hold, the shelter served a swelling number of down-on-their-luck people who had come to town for jobs that subsequently fell through, Marsh said, along with their housing. This year, by contrast, she reports the local homeless coalition has actually been able to find work and/or homes for about half of its clients.

"I feel we're having some real successes this year," Marsh said of the program, which itself is still in its infancy. Aspen had no formal homeless shelter until November 2006, and some remain dubious of the need for one here in one of America's most expensive zip codes. The expanded outreach for the hungry and homeless here is administered by a loose coalition of public entities, formed in 2008.

Before volunteers and county officials began ramping up local homeless outreach four winters ago, Father Thomas O'Brien informally sheltered the homeless at St. Mary.

While St. Mary affords those in need a warm bed for the night, a room at the county Health and Human Services building allows them someplace to go during the day. In past years, the day shelter closed when the building's offices did — daily at 5 p.m. This year, for the first time, those in need can come to the building for an expanded outreach program from 6 to 9 p.m.

There they can eat a hot dinner from the kitchen at the Aspen Valley Hospital. Marsh largely credits the new evening time slot and meal for this year's success in finding jobs and homes for their clients.

"It's a great time for socialization," Marsh said. "The new hours have been a plus for us, because we get to know people and their needs a lot better."

Nan Sundeen, Pitkin County director of health and human services, adds that the evening meal at the human services building is not only for the homeless, but for anyone who needs a meal and can't afford it.

The homeless outreach program operates on a \$30,000 budget for the winter, which includes funds donated from individuals and churches along with a \$15,000 grant from Pitkin County and \$5,000 grant from the city of Aspen.

andrew@aspendailynews.com

Jonathan Crosby/Aspen Daily News

Susie Patterson, a volunteer at the winter homeless shelter held at St.

Mary Catholic Church in Aspen, talks with a resident (not pictured) about his day. The church opens its doors at 9 p.m. for local homeless in need of a place to spend the night and stay warm. The shelter is not as busy as it was last winter.

