

Volunteers flock to area homeless shelters

Santa Fe shelters' helping hands

By Sandra Baltazar Martinez | The New Mexican

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Photo by:

Community members and organizations are stepping up to help the homeless.

Volunteers have been busy preparing meals for guests at three Santa Fe shelters and this weekend the first group of high-school students will be cooking and serving food at the Interfaith Shelter, located in the old Pete's Pets building on Cerrillos Road.

The number of volunteer groups, primarily from the faith community, doubled this year from 20 to 40 according to Susan Odiseos, vice-chairwoman for the Interfaith Shelter Group.

"This Sunday, the government and economics class from Capital High School will be volunteering," Odiseos said. "It's the first official school group, and it's a big step for us. It's exciting."

She said the National Guard recently loaned more than 70 cots to the shelter.

The cold, snowy nights this winter have led more homeless men, women and children to seek refuge at the shelters. The Interfaith Shelter has provided more than 5,000 bed nights so far, Odiseos said, adding that she expected this year's total to surpass last year's 10,126 bed nights.

The St. Elizabeth Shelter and its newest branch, the Casa Familia Urgent Transition Center, are also providing more meals and bed nights.

Casa Familia, which opened in early November, is operating at its full capacity of 32 persons. But nearly half — 46 percent — of the families who stayed at Casa Familia at one point have already been placed in permanent housing, said Deborah Tang, executive director of the St. Elizabeth

Shelter. This means more families will be able to use the Casa Familia services.

When it opened, Casa Familia, at 1604 Berry St., was going to be a five-month winter shelter. It is now scheduled to operate year-round. The Thornburg Charitable Foundation and the Frost Foundation, both of Santa Fe, have each pledged a \$105,000 donation to purchase the \$315,000 building. Individual contributors have donated another \$23,000, said Jim Podesta, the shelter's development director.

According to Podesta, St. Elizabeth has seen a 75 percent increase in the number of meals it serves on Mondays and Fridays — known as resource center days — when the shelter specifically serves the homeless who do not usually stay there.

In 2007, the shelter helped 1,658 people and served 7,932 meals on Mondays and Fridays. By 2009, its resource center days assisted 2,027 people and served 13,913 meals, Podesta said. The average number of meals served in previous years ranged from 120 to 134 per resource day, but now the numbers have jumped to 160 to 180.

On Tuesday, Marlon Guite, St. Elizabeth's resource center manager, with the help of volunteer Chad Chandler Redhouse, prepared eight pounds of potatoes, veggies and ham for the night's guests. Redhouse said he stops by the shelter's kitchen at least three times a week to help.

"I need the karma," Redhouse said with a smile as he placed slices of ham on a tray. "If you want something good to happen, then you do something good."

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