

Homeless shelter residents to the streets

Staff, residents exchange goodbyes as winter homeless shelter shuts down

By Sandra Baltazar Martínez | The New Mexican

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Photo by: [Jane Phillips](#)/The New Mexican

For five months, dozens of men and women had a warm dinner every night and a safe place to sleep.

Tonight, that won't be the case. Interfaith Community Shelter off St. Michael's Drive closed Sunday morning after staff fed breakfast burritos to its 55 guests.

The shelter opened Nov. 8 to offer housing during the winter months, and its money from public and private sources has run out. Its seven-days-a-week service provided more than 6,800 bed nights during the five months that it operated, said Susan Odiseos, one of the team leaders at the shelter.

After many hugs and tears, all of the guests went out the shelter's doors and back into the streets Sunday morning, carrying hygiene kits assembled by First Presbyterian Church and St. Michael's High School youth. Those who needed them also received tents, sleeping bags and clothing provided by the shelter.

But for many, the shelter had turned into a home. Shutting its doors meant having to struggle once more to find a place to sleep.

"We are survivors," said Bill Short, 39, who has been homeless for five years. "Remember when it snowed and we had about three feet of snow? We were in a tent, but we survived."

Short and his friend Toni Jojola, 48, said they had been camping in the woods until they learned about Interfaith Community Shelter. They saw a flier about the facility in a bus. Both claim "this is the best shelter that there's been."

"It's a little community," Jojola said. "It was fun. We made a lot of friends."

Nonetheless, thinking about having to sleep in the woods or along lonely alleys again is a harsh reality.

"We cry about it," Jojola said. "We cry about homelessness."

For a 32-year-old Operation Desert Storm veteran who didn't want to be identified, his homeless situation for the past three years has been a greater challenge than serving in the Army.

"I can't go out and get an ID because my wallet was stolen," he said, sitting next to a gallon of water and a large rolled-up tarp tied with rusty chains. "Then I can't go out and get a job because I don't have an ID. The system makes it so hard. But if you are a millionaire, you get everything you want. If you're poor, you're screwed."

Arturo Cano, 54, said he's been staying at the shelter for a couple of weeks, and he's thankful for the food and the warm sleeping bag he hides under each night. "It's terrible that they're closing. I wish they were (still) open," said Cano, who recently arrived from Chihuahua, Mexico. "We don't have food, we don't know where we're going to sleep next. I just don't want to get in trouble with the police. Maybe we'll go to the river or the woods. ... I came here because the situation in Mexico is worse."

Everyone at the shelter has similar stories. That's why Odiseos said she and the rest of the volunteers will keep pushing city and state officials to open a one-stop-shop shelter that can address not only the basic food and shelter necessities for the homeless, but also offer services including counseling and job training. As of now, there are no definite plans — or money — to reopen the shelter next winter, Odiseos said.

At Interfaith Community Shelter, between 55 and 65 guests showed up every night. Some 450 to 500 volunteers from various faith groups took turns throughout the five months to prepare meals (paid with their own money), and serve and register the guests, Odiseos said. St. Elizabeth Shelter, which was a founding partner, also provided staff to watch the shelter from 9 p.m. to 7 a.m.

Gena Simmons, volunteer from Zia Methodist Church, said she had volunteered 14 days because she wanted to be "of some benefit to others."

Mike Wirtz, member of St. Bede's Episcopal Church, said he volunteered because some of his

relatives in California have also been homeless. "There's a lot more homeless out here than people think," he said. "My concern is, where do they go after the shelter closes this week? Who is going to take care of them?"

Contact Sandra Baltazar Martínez at 986-3062 or smartinez@sfnewmexican.com.