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Warming up for the homeless

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ARLINGTON - Tillie Burgin could have found a warm place for four homeless men to stay last night. But all they would accept was a quick bite to eat and coats for the two who had none.

The men are among the group that she and other social service providers worry about when freezing weather hits North Texas. They choose not to go to shelters, even when it gets cold, said Burgin, director of Mission Arlington, a nonprofit relief agency affiliated with First Baptist Church of Arlington.

"I kept saying, 'Can't you at least give me an address?' All they would say was 'Under the bridge,' " Burgin said. "They were pretty independent."

Burgin found heavy coats for the two men who needed them and provided all four with crackers and cheese. She also invited them back today for a free Thanksgiving lunch at the Salvation Army's new family center at 710 W. Abram St. from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Last night, she planned to load her car with blankets and drive to the overpasses at Texas 360 and Abram Street and Park Row Drive, just in case.

Fortunately, most of their efforts to keep people warm succeed, Burgin said.

Although Fort Worth shelters still had space for more homeless people as darkness fell yesterday, a spokesman for the Presbyterian Night Shelter said he was running out of blankets and mattresses.

"We are getting swamped," said John Suggs, executive director of the shelter. "I can get them in here, but they probably will have to sleep on the floor. We have flat run out (of mattresses)."

He anticipated the number seeking shelter to surpass 400 before the evening ended. The shelter can hold 500, and about 320 showed up the previous night.

The number of new faces showing up in line this winter is surprising, Suggs said.

"I was really surprised this year at the number of men over 40 who have come in," he said. Many of them have been living under bridges, he added.

The Union Gospel Mission and the Salvation Army said they still had space for more yesterday.

The numbers are growing, but many won't show up until later in the evening, said Don Webb, mission superintendent.

Staff at the Community Enrichment Center in North Richland Hills stayed busy the past three days filling 300 requests for turkeys and sacks of food, but they did not serve an unusual number of clients, director Jan Johnson said. The center operates a food bank and housing programs for battered women and the homeless.

Henrietta Beasley is one of several recipients of Mission Arlington's clothing store. She isn't homeless, but she felt the chilly winds of November yesterday and decided to ask for help.

Beasley is one of at least 100 people who filed through the clothes room at Mission Arlington yesterday, looking for sweaters and coats to stave off winter's first cold snap.

"I usually have my own clothes, but they're in storage and I haven't been able to pay the storage fee so this is all I have," Beasley said, gesturing to the gray sweat shirt and jeans she was wearing.

Mission Arlington volunteer Kathy Rich said: "Coats go fast, real fast. . . .It's real cold out there."

A few houses down, in the Mission Arlington Day Shelter, about 15 people sat at tables, eating chicken and watching television. A few were napping.

They're all homeless but they aren't worried about the cold weather, said several members of the group, adding that the Arlington Night Shelter provides them a warm place to stay at night and the day shelter gives them a haven other times.

The cold weather may actually help some people who are near homelessness, said Larry Johnson, director of the Arlington Night Shelter. He noted that landlords are less likely to evict people when temperatures drop.

But if it gets bitter cold this holiday weekend, more people may be knocking on the door at the night shelter and they will be given shelter, Johnson said.

"We'll take care of people," Johnson said. "The last thing we would ever want is for someone to freeze to death in Arlington and that person to have come to us and asked for help."

How to help

Mattresses and blankets can be donated to the night shelter at 2400 Cypress St. in Fort Worth and the Arlington Night Shelter, 325 W. Division St.; Mission Arlington, 210 W. South St., needs winter clothing; Gospel Mission, 1331 E. Lancaster Ave., needs blankets and coats; blankets for the Salvation Army can be delivered to 1855 E. Lancaster Ave., Fort Worth, and 710 W. Abram St., Arlington. Staff writer Anita Baker contributed to this report.

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