

ENGAGE

Extreme weather

Emergency bed shortfall 'dreadful'

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"I have ulcers," said Surrey's Extreme Weather Response co-ordinator as rain pelted the dark and dreary city Monday afternoon.

The night prior, emergency beds for the homeless were called to open for the first time this season in Surrey and White Rock.

Jonquil Hallgate took a deep breath as she revealed there are very few spots in the city's north end this year.

"We have pretty much no spaces in North Surrey," Hallgate said. "We're waiting for FRAFCA (Fraser Region Aboriginal Friendship Centre Association) to come online with 18 spaces but it's not quite ready. We, at this point, don't have many other spaces. We have 10 spaces for youth with Pacific Community Resource Society and 10 spaces for women at NightShift (Street Ministries in Whalley).

"But that's it."

The problem, said Hallgate, is many of the former locations for extreme weather shelters have become temporary or permanent spaces, after the closure of 135A Street to tents, meaning those venues are not available for the extreme weather program anymore.

"If one person's outside and suffering, it's dread-



PHOTO: NIGHT SHIFT MINISTRIES



A past extreme weather response shelter set up for women inside NightShift Street Ministries. There are very few beds in the city's north end this year, says Jonquil Hallgate, left.

ful," she said.

"When it's many people outside suffering..." her voice trailing off.

Currently, there are 25 spots available in White Rock at the Star of the Sea Catholic Church, 25 in Cloverdale at Pacific Community Church, 10 at Pacific Community Resource Society and 10 at NightShift, for a grand total of 70. Ideally, Hallgate would like to see that be 130 or 140, and organizers are desperately hunting for sites in the north.

"We need a site in Newton and we need a site in North Surrey. One that can take men and women," she pleaded. "If anybody knows of an empty space they're willing to let us have until the end of March, please contact me."

What spaces are ideal?

"We need to have something that's a central location, either close to transportation or is easy for people in North Surrey can walk to, and the same in Newton. It should be something in the town centre to allow people to access it easily," said Hallgate.

"Or if a church, for example, has a gathering room that can accommodate 10 to 30 people, for people on mats, and if we can get in from say anywhere from 7 o'clock to 9 o'clock in the evening and be out by 7 (a.m.) in the morning," she added, noting extreme weather beds still means people must brave the weather during the day. Empty storefronts would also work, Hallgate said.

Anyone who has space to offer, can email Hallgate

at surreyextremeweather@gmail.com. Also needed are donations for those living on the street, said Hallgate.

A total of 602 homeless people were identified in Surrey in the most recent 2017 Metro Vancouver Homeless Count, done every three years. That was a 49 per cent increase (199 more people) than were counted in Surrey in 2014, the last time the count occurred.

Last June, an estimated 160 homeless people were moved into temporary Whalley modular units.

But Keir Macdonald, executive director of Look-out Housing and Health Society which runs the temporary housing, says there still isn't enough shelter to meet the demand, despite the new units, which he called a "fantastic start."

The Extreme Weather Response (EWR) program is a provincially funded initiative that officially runs from Nov. 1 to March 31, although in past years, extreme weather has resulted in calls to open in October.

The beds, often mats on the floor of a building, open "to provide additional temporary emergency shelter spaces during periods of extreme winter weather which threaten the health and safety of individuals experiencing homelessness," according to BC Housing.