

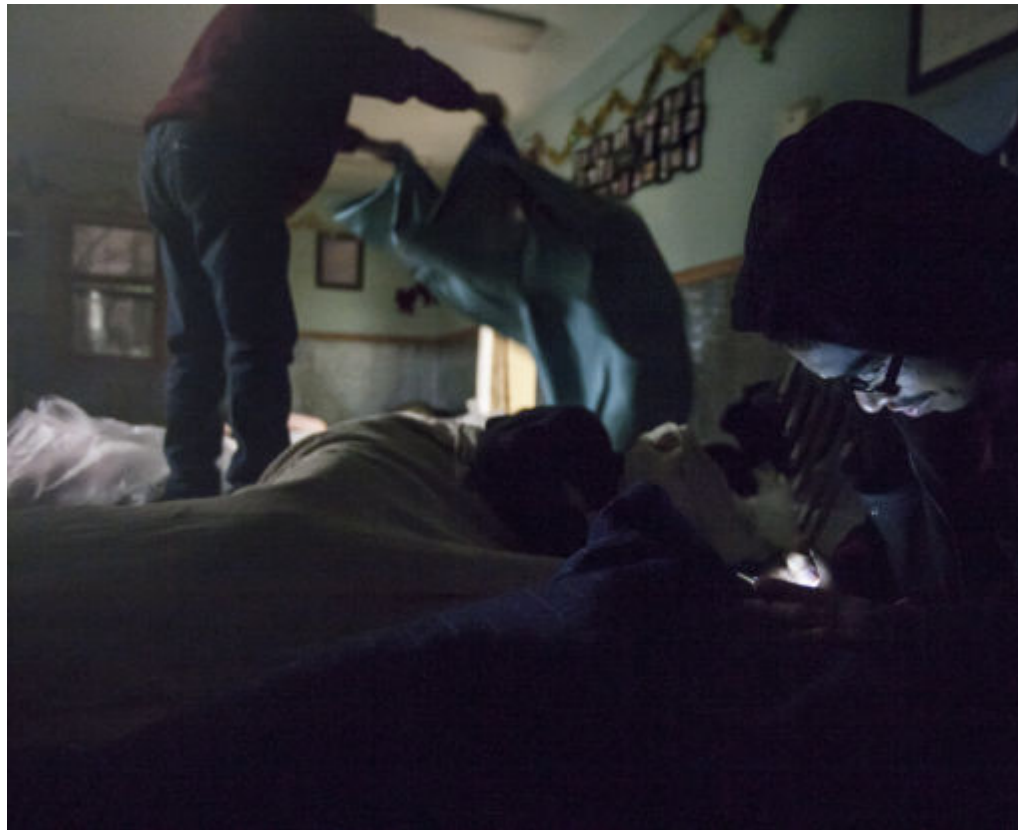
https://trib.com/news/local/casper/no-silent-night-crowded-casper-mission-provides-vital-shelter-against-icy-cold/article_8bf9ba25-1417-53be-a08e-bff2cc445437.html

homeless

No silent night: Crowded Casper mission provides vital shelter against icy cold

By **TOM DIXON** Star-Tribune staff writer

Dec 5, 2013



David Ewing checks his phone before going to sleep alongside nine other homeless men Tuesday on the floor of th mission has 43 beds, but has been filled beyond capacity since the weather began to get colder.

Ryan Dorgan | Star-Tribune

By **TOM DIXON** Star-Tribune staff writer

Outside, the temperature is 7 degrees and dropping fast. It's Tuesday night. Snow's been falling all day and it shows no signs of stopping.

Out of the cold emerges three figures. They walk through the central Wyoming Rescue Mission door just as the evening movie, “Forrest Gump,” gets underway.

It’s bitterly cold, even for Casper. Nights like these always lead to a crowded shelter, and that means the three guests will have to sleep on mats.

George Creecy, desk clerk for the early evening shift, hands the men a questionnaire.

Question: Where did you stay last night?

Answers: A bridge. A friend’s couch. A car.

Do you have any disabilities? Guests – everyone staying with the Mission is referred to as a guest – often mark no, but then circle that they have drug dependency issues, or a mental illness.

People are also reading...

- 1 Your expanded Casper Star-Tribune coming soon**
- 2 Wyoming schools chief releases sweeping educational reform plan**
- 3 Illinois girl missing for 6 years found in NC after she was recognized from Netflix series**
- 4 Two men die when truck collides with minivan**

After the paperwork, Creecy explains the schedule.

Curfew is 10 p.m. Wake-up call is 6 a.m. Continental breakfast until 7:15 a.m. If you’re not working, you’re at the library hunting for a job. Lunch at noon. Dinner at 6 p.m.

Rinse, repeat.

The three new guys are all shivering. One slept under a bridge the night before, but the cold drove him inside tonight. One looks ready to fall asleep on his feet. They're ready to crawl under some covers, but they can't yet. The drop-in room is currently a movie theater. During the course of a day it serves as a hangout and a cafeteria, too. After the movie, it – and the hallway – will serve as a bedroom for 12 people.

Holding court

Temperatures continue to drop as the hours crawl by. Even guests who have been kicked out are given a place for the night. The staff's conscience will not allow otherwise.

While most guests sit in the drop-in theater, Eric Vashon trudges through the snow and around the mission to the smoking "penalty box" outside – because if you want a cigarette, your penalty is being cold, one guest jokes. Squares cut into the squat, concrete building serve as windows and a doorway, but do nothing to hold out the cold. One lamp bathes the building in soft light. Scattered inside are several cans, all half full of cigarette butts.

Here Vashon, a guest, holds court for anyone who will listen, bumming cigarettes – "Hey there, moneybags, I know you got a spare" – from anyone who braves the bitter night. Vashon worries about identity, vacillating between wanting to be the anti-establishment punk he sees in the mirror, and not wanting to repeat actions that repeatedly landed him in trouble with the law.

"You dress like a punk, you get treated like a punk; you dress like a billionaire, I'm gonna guess you get treated like a billionaire," Vashon muses, smoke billowing into the frigid night. "But just because I'm young doesn't mean I don't know about s---, don't mean I haven't seen some s---, and nobody treats you with respect."

Vashon works at a local fast food joint, but he's not earning enough to support himself yet. He said managers are not willing to give him more hours and it's hard for him to find better work because of his criminal background.

Vashon hates the idea of living by somebody else's rules, but he has good reason to try. He wants to bring his 2-year-old son to Casper.

“Some people are here to find God. For some it's just another stop on the way,” Vashon preaches. “Some people, they're trying to make a life for themselves. That's me.”

Making a life

Creecy, a mission case manager and the evening's desk clerk, understands what it takes to make a life. He was originally a guest at Central Wyoming Rescue Mission. Like many people who find themselves here, Creecy made a bad decision. It cost him a year in prison. After he got out in August 2009, he decided to start fresh here in Casper so he could be closer to his family. He came with nothing and the shelter took him in. Creecy hated religion, but the mission's Discipleship program turned him into a believer. Being a case manager and desk clerk for the mission is his calling, although it has taken him awhile to grow into his new label: authority.

“I'm running around like a chicken with his head cut off trying to take care of things, but I still have to make sure to treat everybody with dignity. I don't want to act like a fascist telling people what to do just because I can,” Creecy says. “Having the power to take away somebody's place to stay for the night, I don't ever want to take that lightly. It breaks my heart when I have to do that.”

There are conditions for staying at the shelter. During the next week, newcomers to the mission get their tuberculosis shot, sign up for Wyoming Employment Services, apply for food stamps and meet with a case manager. Guests have two weeks to find a job, and if they are working 40 hours a week, they can stay for the next three months. Most of their paycheck will be set aside for final checkout. The idea is for guests to have enough in cash and food stamps to pay rent the first month and fill their fridge.

For almost everyone, the shelter is a safety net for climbing out of rock bottom. Nearly every guest has the same short-term goal: their own place. At the mission, long-term goals are nebulous, but almost everyone can tell you how they

are saving money and getting their own place.

Soon.

The mission isn't the end, but the start. A way to regain a sense of self-worth. A way to re-create their own identity, instead of submitting to the definition of others.

“People see a title: Homeless. Drug addict. Convict,” said Anthony Poole, a long-term guest who participates in one of the mission’s programs. “They’re too lazy to look beyond that and find out why you are the way you are. They don’t care.”

No silent night

The smokers walk inside just before curfew. The drop-in has transformed from movie theater to a mat motel for nine – three more jammed into the hallway. On this night, 55 guests try to sleep through snoring roommates, guests coughing their way through a chest cold, desk clerks changing posts in the night, work boots stomping on the way out the door to plow snow.

With so many people in one place, the shelter is never truly quiet.

It may not be home, it may not be much. On this brutally cold December night, though, being warm and fed is enough.

Popular in the Community

