

The Salt Lake Tribune

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New strategy for homeless

By Julia Lyon

The Salt Lake Tribune

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Updated:03/29/2010 11:51:29 PM MDT

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Helper - As community leaders in Salt Lake City debate moving the downtown homeless shelter, one eastern Utah town has taken a radically different approach: This spring, Helper will permanently close its shelter, hoping to stop a cycle of homeless transients moving through town.

Two newly renovated buildings - one opened Monday in nearby Price - will offer transitional and permanent housing for low-income residents.

"It's no longer about free room and board," said John Fazzio, the shelter director. "It's about: Let's get you back on your feet."

Residents moving into the new buildings will have to apply and will typically need at least several hundred dollars for deposits, although some federal stimulus money will be available for rent assistance during the next several years. Home to generations of coal miners, Helper is in Carbon County, which has a sparse population but the highest percentage of homeless residents of any county in Utah. In a region with little affordable housing, the wait for public housing and rent subsidies has grown from six months to almost two years. The number of households seeking help at the food pantry in February was up 77 percent compared to two years ago.

"You hear about the poverty stricken areas throughout the United States - you never think your community is going to be hit like that," said Jackie Butkovich, the community services program manager at the Southeastern Utah Association of Local Governments.

Nickole McCarty, a mother of two, stopped by the community services building Thursday looking for help with her family's electric and gas bills through a federal energy assistance program. Her husband, a sand blaster at Pacific Central Steel, lost his job more than a year ago. Now he is studying to get his truck driver license while she studies criminal justice. Asking for help made her feel somewhat "worthless," the 24-year-old said. "I feel like I'm not doing my job right." Fazzio attributed the high numbers of homeless at Helper's shelter - 211 in the last fiscal year - to the fact that people were allowed to stay inside all day, which is not typical. The good food, such as pot roasts and homemade ice cream served during several meals a day in the soup kitchen, may have also played a role, he said.

On Thursday afternoon, Andrew Dunegan, 27, his arm in a sling, watched as friends helped move his family's belongings from the shelter into the back of a truck.

"In a way, it's probably good," he said of the shelter closure, as a pogo stick, a small bureau, blankets and chairs went into the truck. "Instead of depending on everything here, they're going to have to go out and look for work." The father of two said the shelter's imminent closure had helped push him to find employment. In crisis after his young daughter got spinal meningitis last year, he left his job at the coal mine. When the family ran out of money, they ended up in the shelter. After several months doing construction and carpentry jobs, he is now moving with his family into an apartment in Price.

After carrying furniture out of the shelter, one of Dunegan's friends said he worried about people needing help in the future. "They could die in the middle of the night, frozen," said Travis Chandler, who plans to leave town if he

can't find work. Price Mayor Joe Piccolo and others say community resources will be tapped to provide housing in emergencies. A few miles away, Benny Timothy, 44, sat watching television in his room at the Newhouse Apartments. The building opened as a fancy hotel almost 100 years ago, but had been abandoned and occupied by pigeons for years. The basement was filled with mining picks and lanterns.

Now with the help of state funding, the facility has been reborn as 17 apartments, providing permanent housing for low-income individuals and families. Timothy, who has a brain injury from a car accident, is one of several residents who had lived at the shelter before moving in.

Others were struggling in smaller or more expensive housing, such as Tamara Quintana. Her 3-year-old daughter started clapping her hands with delight when she learned she would have her own room at Newhouse.

"It used to make me feel sad all the time, being all in one room," the mother said while on a break from her motel housekeeping job. Making \$7.25 per hour, she would clean 19 rooms during the day before returning to her new apartment. Tenants at Newhouse and at the new transitional housing in Helper will pay rent adjusted to area poverty levels. The hope is that these lower rents will help prevent homelessness. Residents in the transitional housing will also receive management to help them become more independent. The soup kitchen in Helper will remain open to anyone.

Though the renovated buildings won't eliminate the region's affordable housing challenges, this is a good start, said Mayor Piccolo.

"We're making a difference for one life at a time," the mayor said. "That's irrevocably positive." jlyon@sltrib.com