



Local shelters see more first-time homeless

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VICTORVILLE • When Katie Mayfield lost her home following a serious illness in late 2009, she turned to family to shelter her, her eldest child and her three sets of twins.

After relying on relative" kindness for a year, the financial strain got to be too much. Mayfield was forced to turn to transitional housing programs and homeless shelters for help, but found none in her hometown of San Bernardino that would accommodate a family of her size.

For the last two weeks, Mayfield and her seven children have been living at High Desert Homeless Services' shelter on Amargosa Road in Victorville.

As her children braved Thursday's wind and cold to climb on the shelter's playground equipment, 4-year-old twin Kami snuggled shyly against Mayfield, who expressed her appreciation for the staff, volunteers and other clients who have given them a temporary home for the holidays.

While robust holiday shopping, rising stocks and shrinking unemployment point to an upswing in the economy, the recession's effects continue to linger at local organizations serving the neediest of populations.

Some 55 percent of the people being served by the Victor Valley Rescue Mission during a snapshot study in October said they were homeless for the first time, the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions recently reported. That's compared with 35 percent of first-time homeless at 114 gospel rescue missions surveyed across North America.

"Dire financial situations can lead to a multitude of issues for individuals and families," said Ron Wilson, director of Victor Valley Rescue Mission, "and we're equipped to help them."

Nearly three-quarters of those who visited the Rescue Mission on Tracy Street in Victorville seeking food, clothing, rehabilitation and more didn't define themselves as homeless — more than four times the percentage who came for resources other than shelter at all the locations surveyed.

The mission here sees fewer single adults, more women and more people who struggle with mental health issues than were found on average at the AGRM's other 114 sites. There are fewer veterans and a slightly older population here, with roughly the same racial mix as seen across North America.

Violence against homeless individuals is on the rise, the study shows. In the past year, among those who visited rescue missions across North America, these reports have increased 6 percent to 21 percent. Among those served at the Rescue Mission here, reports of violence have increased to 12 percent.

With such a broad range of issues driving ever-more people to seek services, both the Rescue Mission and High Desert Homeless provide a range of services to keep people housed, fed, sober and to rehabilitate them. "We offer hope and practical help daily, whether people need a few living essentials or are in desperate need of shelter," Wilson said.

For Mayfield and her brood of seven, a roof over their heads is the best gift.

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