

## Stamford Homeless Shelters Over Capacity

By Eve Sullivan

STAMFORD -- Allison Pratt once lived the American dream, with a high-paying job as an advertising director in Wilton, a hefty retirement plan, two expensive houses, cars and a family.

Then a string of unfortunate circumstances -- including a layoff, a divorce and the poor economy -- gave her a rude awakening. She was left in financial ruin, suffering from depression and with nowhere to stay.

"I've been here almost two months," the 52-year-old said, while sitting at the Women's Shelter on Woodland Place Wednesday night. "But I've been homeless longer than that. I'm going on two years of homelessness."



Pratt is among thousands of people in the state who find themselves in homeless shelters, during a time when that space is extremely valuable. This winter, record cold temperatures are bringing more people into those safe houses, looking for a warm place to sleep and a decent meal.

"We are over capacity," said Kelly Leather, spokeswoman for Inspirica, which runs the Women's Shelter along with other supportive housing for families. "We're working at 116 to 120 percent capacity. Because it's so cold, we're not going to turn people away."

On Wednesday evening, all of the estimated 70 homeless shelters in the state reported their numbers to the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness for its annual Point In Time count -- an annual census of the state's homeless population. The results of this year's tally won't be available for a few months.

"The Point In Time is just a snapshot of who's homeless that night," said Jason Shaplen, chief executive officer at Inspirica, formerly St. Luke's Lifeworks. "There were over 4,500 last year in the state."

Each year, Shaplen said they conduct a shelter count and every other year they conduct a street count. This year, he said the shelter count determined that Inspirica has 150 beds and 152 clients.

"In other words, we are all at over capacity," he said.

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Shaplen called the PIT count a "tremendously important tool" to measure the challenge of ending homelessness. However, he said it's not a perfect tool and doesn't include all of the people on the street, because there's no way to look behind every building and under every bridge.

"It doesn't count the tens of thousands of people who have lost their home and are doubled up on the couches of family and friends," Shaplen added. "Those people are technically not homeless." Last year's count showed some "pretty alarming numbers" for Stamford and Greenwich, with a 45 percent increase in the number of homeless people, Shaplen said. The number jumped from 280 to 405, he said.

"The number of people living on the street almost tripled," he said. "So we are all looking at great concern and interest in where we are in this year's count."

Over at the Shelter for the Homeless on Pacific Street, Executive Director Rafael Pagan said they had a total of 109 people on Wednesday. "We're licensed for 67, so that gives you an idea of how much over we are in terms of numbers," he said.

The city allows them to accommodate more people during the winter, but they're pretty much at the maximum, Pagan said. The volume, he said, is consistent with the numbers in the state, which show everyone at or above capacity.

The increase in homeless people is caused by the extreme cold weather, poor economic conditions and lack of affordable housing in the region, Pagan said.

"All these high-rise buildings are meant to attract people who would otherwise choose Manhattan," Pagan said. "It's not for people who live here."

At the Women's Shelter, Leather said they have 25 occupied beds, as well as people sleeping on cots and couches. She said they're finding that's the case year-round.

"Usually we work with other places to find shelter," she said. "But if they show up in the middle of the night, we provide shelter."

Each night, a different volunteer group provides dinner for the women and Wednesday a Greenwich church served ziti and salad. Leather said they recommend bringing a healthy meal, with a decent amount of protein.

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"The women we serve are emergency housing," Leather said. "They're coming from different areas, some of them domestic violence, some are chronic homeless and some lost their job."

Olga Beaudoin, case manager at the facility, said they have women ranging from 19 to 62 years old at the facility. For some, she said it's difficult to find a job because they lack computer skills and training.

Since being laid off, Pratt said she's taken a waitressing job and worked for an RV company. "I haven't been able to find the amount of money I was being paid and the jobs are so scarce," she said. "And the jobs I am able to find, I'm not able to sustain a rent."

At the shelter, Pratt said they assist with creating a resume, provide computers, give workshops on housing and help clients proceed with their lives.

"It's incredible the knowledge and assistance you receive from this organization to improve your life," she said.

Pratt said she has two potential jobs that she's following up on and she's staying aggressive. "I know I'll eventually make it, because I will not stop until I do. I will not stop until I have what I used to."

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