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When temperatures dip, conditions turn deadly for homeless

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FITCHBURG -- A cold snap like the one that swept the region last week brings back a sad memory for Ward 3 City Councilor Joel Kaddy. Years ago, Kaddy, then a police officer, received a call about a homeless man seeking shelter inside the intermodal station on Main Street.

Kaddy gave the man two dollars, and told him to buy a cup of coffee at Dunkin Donuts across the street. He made some calls to find a place for the man to go for the night, but when he finished, the homeless man was nowhere to be found.

"They found him the next morning. He died of exposure," said Kaddy.

Now, Kaddy serves on the board of directors at the Valiton Home on Fairmount Street, which is his way of trying to make sure another person does not freeze to death on the streets of Fitchburg.

Joan David, administrative aide to Rep. Stephen DiNatale, D-Fitchburg, is also on the Valiton Board. David said though the need for shelter for the homeless has remained steady through the economic downturn, she suspects homeless people may now be finding shelter inside abandoned buildings throughout the city.

But for Fitchburg's homeless, there are several public and private options for getting out of the freezing winter temperatures.

Judith Pasierb, Assistant Executive Director at Our Fathers House Inc., said the 28-bed facility is at capacity, which is typical for the winter months.

"Since late fall, we've pretty much been filled day-to-day," said Pasierb. "The cold weather plays a big part of this. On colder days, we do see more people showing up at our door."

Normally, clients come in around 4 p.m., Pasierb said, and are given dinner and a bed to sleep in. In the morning, they have to leave, though Pasierb said that policy is flexible, in case of extreme temperatures.

"If it's extremely cold, yes, we might open during the day," said Pasierb.

Our Father's House holds 20 men and eight women at any given time, though homeless women and children usually end up at a family shelter in Devens, Pasierb said.

People from the ages of 21 to 70 have been known to seek shelter at **Our Father's House** over the years, Pasierb said.

"It's surprising. They're all ages," said Pasierb.

Pasierb said there are a variety of reasons people become homeless, all of which could happen to anyone.

Some of her clients are recovering from drug or alcohol addiction, others have mental health issues, or have suffered trauma.

"I would say they're people like all of us," said Pasierb.

Michael Lettieri is a house manager, and resident at the Valiton Home for four years, but he remembers well what it's like to be homeless.

"It's cold and lonely. There's nothing to do, and nothing to eat," said Lettieri.

Lettieri said much of the homeless population is made of people who have simply lost their jobs, and end up with nothing, something the public doesn't always recognize.

"They figure homeless people are a bunch of thieves," said Lettieri. "They've never been in the situation, so they don't know."

As cities and towns go, Fitchburg has ample low-income housing available to those who have trouble making ends meet, according to Phil Hailer, spokesman for the Department of Housing and Community Development.

Hailer said 10.4 percent of housing in the city meets the "affordable housing" requirements detailed by the state. State law says the goal for municipalities is ten percent.

But Pasierb said while many homeless clients she works with have jobs, it's not enough money to pay even low rent for affordable housing.

Fitchburg Police Officer Jude Chabot, a member of the Valiton Home Board of Directors, says there actually aren't that many people who live outdoors -- in the woods or by train tracks -- in Fitchburg. There are probably about 15, Chabot estimates, while the rest of the homeless are serviced by shelters or long-term homes.

Those who do seek shelter outside have serious drug and alcohol addictions. Often times, police respond to calls about homeless people fighting underneath bridges.

"They're under there to drink," said Chabot.

Police usually bring those people to the hospital, because dry shelters, like Valiton and **Our Father's House**, cannot accept people under the influence.

When shelters become full on freezing nights, there is the Community Fund, which is money donated by a private benefactor, and administered by the local United Way office in Fitchburg.

United Way will provide hotel vouchers to shelters to hand out to those who need a place to stay during extreme winter weather and temperatures.

People who are turned away from shelters for lack of space take the vouchers to the hotels, which then bill the Community Fund for the rooms.

Bill White, spokesman for United Way, said they give out three or four vouchers on a given night.

"It's been a tremendous resource for the community," said White.