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Jean Hill and Rob Wesemann: Resource centers are not turning away the homeless



(Francisco Kjolseth | Tribune file photo) Shelter the Homeless and Catholic Community Services of Utah hold a public open house at the Gail Miller Resource Center on Friday, Sept. 6, 2019, with self-guided tours for the public to see the brand new building and learn about the services that will be provided there for both men and women.

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As news reports suggest, the new homeless resource centers for women are full on a regular basis. The strong response of women seeking access to the resource centers is a testament to the great success of the centers in providing women with a safe place to breathe, get their feet back under them and access the services they need to move, permanently, out of homelessness.

What is not accurate are reports that providers turn women away when the resource centers are full. The Salt Lake Valley Coalition to End Homelessness assures anyone who is experiencing homelessness and the broader community that any individual who comes to a resource center is offered shelter for the night, though perhaps not in the preferred resource center.

The daily experience at each of the resource centers reminds us that moving someone permanently out of homelessness is not a fast or easy process for many. Addressing each individual's specific needs takes time, especially if we seek to do so in a manner that does not re-traumatize an individual who has been living in trauma for days, weeks, months or even years at a time. Some women will transition out of the resource center easily, opening a bed for someone else. Other women, and men, will need more than a night or two.

There is a lot of understandable anxiety out there for clients as we move into an entirely new coordinated entry system. Our partners at Utah Community Action are working diligently to ensure that all staff are communicating that there are multiple shelter options available even if the resource centers are full. Any person in need of shelter or a resource center should call 801-990-9999.

Shelter is available every night and no one is turned away to the streets, though they may not have access to their preferred location immediately. Through the Coordinated Intake process, women have access to the two new Resource Centers, motels or overflow shelter at St. Vincent de Paul. Women not staying in a Resource Center can get services during the day at the Weigand Center. If the demand continues to grow, additional options for shelter are available.

The service providers and others are reviewing data and talking on a daily basis to develop more efficiencies within the bed management systems to ensure clients are able to gain access to services.

The team working on the transition from the Road Home's downtown shelter to the new resource centers recognizes that the message on how to access shelter needs to be strong and consistent so people experiencing homelessness know they do not have to sleep on the streets. The transition to the new buildings, along with the transition to a new Coordinated Entry system is evolving and improving daily. Additional space for overflow is possible, but the more critical work is to divert people from shelter altogether and into permanent housing solutions or residential treatment.

Service providers are also focused on sending a clear message to all clients that the answer to a request for a warm place to spend the night will never be “no.” When a person in need comes to any location, they may hear that a bed is not available “right now” but will be later that night or in a nearby overflow location.

The Salt Lake Valley Coalition to End Homelessness brings service providers, businesses, government leaders, people with lived experience of homelessness, faith leaders, community advocates, and anyone else committed to ending homelessness to the table. Together, we are working every day to make experiences of homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring. Meeting such a goal is not easy, simple, or fast, but it is doable if we continue to collaborate to solve both the long-term issues that lead to homelessness and the short-term needs each individual presents at our collective doors. If you would like to learn more or join our efforts, visit <https://endutahhomelessness.org/salt-lake-valley/> .



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