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Homeless survive latest cold snap

By MARK WAITE

Janet Woods and Jud Dikes were sitting at a table at Petrack Park Tuesday morning, their legs snuggling under a sleeping bag, trying to keep warm.

The overnight lows in the teens this past week have made it tough for the Pahrump homeless population.

Woods said the zipper ripped on their tent behind the sand dunes next to the Salvation Army thrift store on Dahlia Street. She said they put a blanket in front of the tent to block the cold air from getting in.

But Woods said she'd rather camp out in Pahrump than stay at a homeless shelter back in Las Vegas.

"I've been here 13, 14 years and I've never seen it this cold," Dikes said.

Dikes estimated about 15 homeless people are currently camped out in the cold. Three tents aren't easily visible to passing motorists on Dahlia Street unless they look for them perched behind the sand dunes.

A small dog tied to a post was fending off intruders. Trash was strewn around the site along with a couple shopping carts.

"We sit here because people come by and give us some work," Dikes said at the park.

"The church people brought us blankets, sleeping bags," he said. "We had a guy come here yesterday, give me two big bags of groceries."

Volunteers from Trinity Assembly of God have been visiting the homeless every morning, giving them a cup of hot coffee and offering some Bible study, Pastor Larry Krake said. They've been trying to help them stay warm during the cold snap, he said.

"We try to make sure they have sleeping bags, try to get them a tent," Krake said. "We have an outreach with them.

"In the last year we have ministered to over 90 people that are homeless," Krake said. "Probably at any given time there's 20 to 30."

Dikes said volunteers from the church have given him vouchers to take a shower at the Horizon Market convenience store on Highway 372 and Linda Street.

A group of homeless people had previously been evicted from behind the China Wok Restaurant nearby, after the property owner was notified, Sheriff Tony DeMeo said. One man who was evicted moved his tent down East Basin Avenue to near the Pahrump Elks Lodge.

"That was private property. They were advised they were trespassing on the property. We contacted the property owners and we said, "Are you aware you had a homeless contingent living there?" DeMeo said.

Sheriff's department representatives wish people wouldn't take care of the homeless, which encourages them to stay.

"Are they really homeless? No. But they don't want to pay rent," DeMeo said. "We actually have a detail that goes out and checks up on them."

There have been different homeless people picked up for crimes, the sheriff said. The most egregious was Robert Yowell, 52, a homeless alcoholic who was evicted by his family. Yowell was charged in the kidnapping and sexual assault of a 36 year-old Pahrump woman driving behind the Wal-Mart store July 16.

DeMeo said another homeless person was arrested for sexually assaulting a 6-year-old child. Another homeless person was a suspect in 15 to 20 burglaries of businesses, he said.

Other homeless people have been picked up and placed in civil protective custody, because, like Janet Woods, they're unable to care for themselves, the sheriff said.

Krake said a few organizations have talked about establishing a homeless shelter in Pahrump, like the Salvation Army, Church on a Mission and his own church, Trinity Assembly of God. The bottom line is money or donated land to put such a shelter. Krake said his church has land but can't be the site of a homeless shelter.

Capt. Arlene Torres, of the Salvation Army, and Pastor Paul Jordan of Church on a Mission, were unavailable for comment.

A previous attempt to establish a homeless shelter was loudly shot down by Pahrump Town Board Chairman Tim Leavitt about five years ago. DeMeo also hopes a homeless shelter doesn't come to pass in Pahrump.

"I'm not in favor of a homeless shelter in Pahrump Valley," DeMeo said. "Cities that have homeless shelters, the majority of homeless have issues, either drug addiction or psychological problems.

"Around that you have 50, 60 people evicted from the homeless shelter hanging around causing problems for the police," he said,

"We don't have services for them but Las Vegas does. You don't want to be heartless but people that are homeless, that's a decision they make."

On the other hand, DeMeo advised the Pahrump Town Board recently they couldn't pass an ordinance making it a crime to be homeless.

Not all the homeless are lazy. Shanna Reynolds, owner of Premier Labor Force, said her company will occasionally get a homeless person come by for a day labor job, but she said her company doesn't travel to pick up laborers. What Dikes referred to would have to be private individuals picking up laborers. Prospective employees have to come to her office with valid identification to sign up for work, she said.

Krake was more optimistic about some of the homeless people in Pahrump.

"We actually have been able to place a couple in a home. There's more (homeless) than you see in the park," he said.