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Homelessness strains Detroit shelters

Foreclosures, loss of fed funding cited for increased demand

BY SERENA MARIA DANIELS THE DETROIT NEWS

Detroit— Even for the most desperate, sleeping sitting up in a stackable, armless chair in a former industrial space is considered a last resort.

And yet, as homelessness increases in Detroit, more people who need respite from the cold are turning to such a place to stay warm.

"We have had to order more chairs, because of the increasing number of homeless," said Lewis Hickson, operations manager for the Neighborhood Service Organization's Tumaini Center at 3430 Third Ave.

Every year in November when temperatures dip below freezing, the Tumaini Center provides expanded seating in a commercial space with concrete floors to serve as overflow for the area's emergency warming centers. So far this cold season, some 30 to 40 additional people a night more than the typical 130 have sought refuge.

"It really puts pressure on our security people because when you have that many people in the same location, it makes it difficult to maintain control," said Hickson.

Last year, 22,428 people in Detroit found themselves without a [home](#), said Barbara Ritter, project director with Michigan's Homeless Management Information System, a Housing and Urban

Development Department-funded database for the Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness. Without seeing this year's numbers, advocates expect an increase.

"I think there are a couple of things going on here. It's really complex," Ritter said.

Ritter pointed to the loss of federal stimulus **money** that organizations used to provide sustainable, permanent housing and assistance to prevent homelessness, cuts in utility assistance and Michigan's continued housing foreclosure crisis as factors that contribute to an uptick in homelessness.

That apparent upward trend, coupled with the loss of services that provide emergency housing, has increased the demand for existing shelters.

In October, St. Aloysius Parish at 1234 Washington Blvd. shuttered its warming center — where people from downtown could stop by for hot coffee, meals, medical care and warm clothing. The church's roof was on the verge of collapse, and the Archdiocese of Detroit was unable to continue underwriting the parish or pay to fix the roof, said the church's Rev. Tod Laverty.

The service was not exclusive to the homeless population and did not provide overnight shelter, but on a good day, 300 to 400 people lined up to seek refuge from the cold or have a free meal. Now the parish's **volunteers** are dispatched two days a week, either by foot or on three-wheeled carts, around downtown from Harmonie Park and give the basics out.

"When they closed that meant there were fewer places for people to go," Hickson said. "Naturally, we're going to experience an increase in the number of people who would come here."