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Santa Fe prepares for 'Code Blue' response in extreme cold to shelter homeless

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Nov 18, 2025



Ben Steinbach, from left, Lexus Zarbok, Ayden Mages and Nathaniel Saine install a Pallet shelter Friday at Agape House. The structure will serve as a community room that will be used during "Code Blue" events this winter when nighttime temperatures dip below 15 degrees.

Nathan Burton/The New Mexican

As temperatures begin to drop — with lows below freezing in the forecast — Santa Fe officials and staff at Agape House are making preparations to serve homeless people in extreme cold weather.

The city has formalized a process created last winter for establishing pop-up homeless shelters during "Code Blue" events — when temperatures fall to 15 degrees or lower — and will be drawing on workers from the nonprofit Urban Alchemy, which operates the city-owned homeless shelter on Cerrillos Road, to staff the facilities.

"The primary objective is to save lives, pure and simple," city Community Health and Safety Director Henri Hammond-Paul said in an interview late last month about the city's preparations for emergency shelter amid harsh winter weather.

The city has the capacity to offer 60 to 80 emergency shelter beds during extreme weather, something Hammond-Paul said puts it in a strong position heading into the winter.

There are about 280 shelter beds in Santa Fe on any given night, according to previous numbers from city officials. Estimates vary for the number of unsheltered homeless people here; a list of the city's homeless population tallied several years ago identified about 375 people, but advocates for the homeless have said they believe the true number could be much higher.

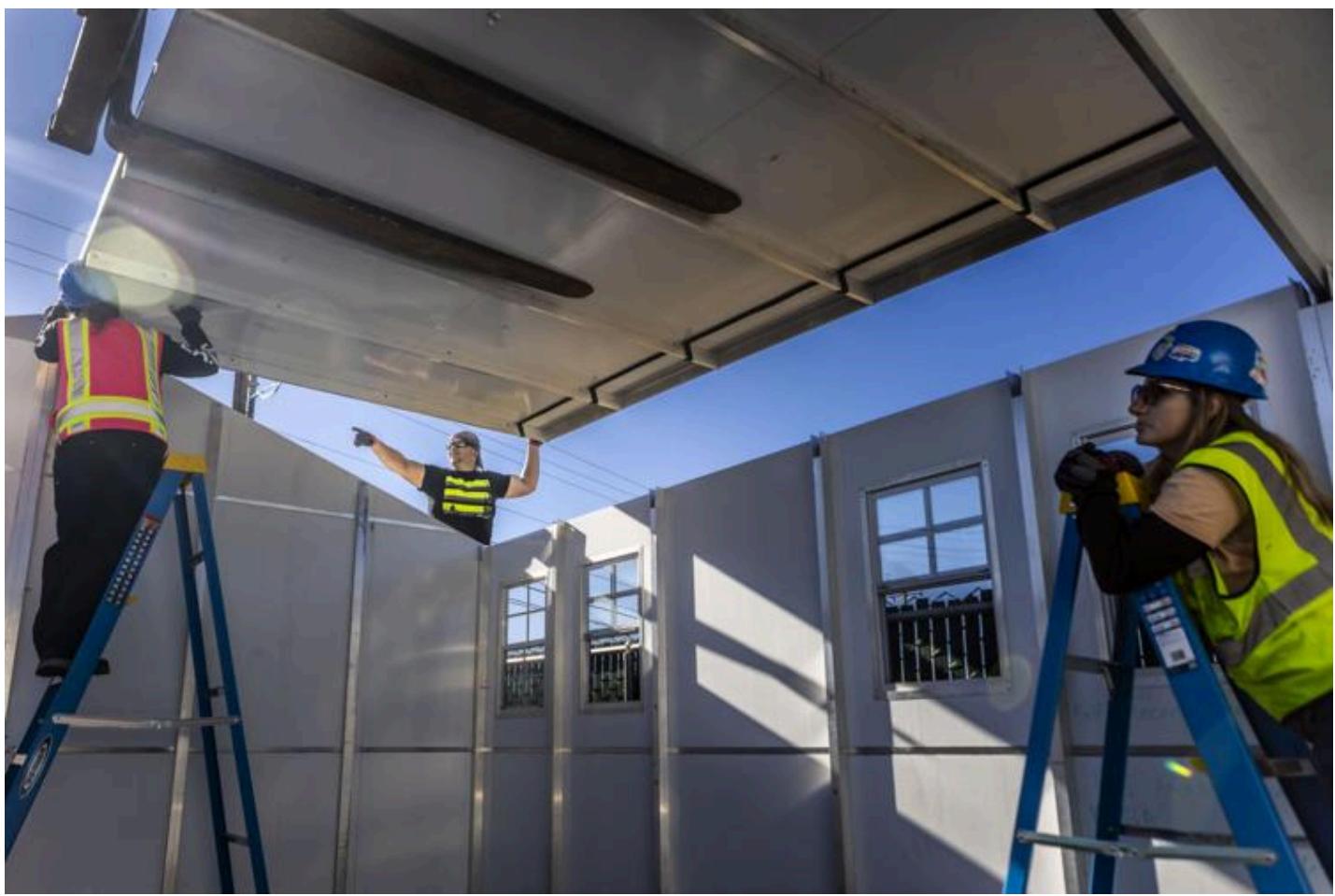
Ramping up resources

Code Blue, a citywide protocol to provide homeless people with shelter and cold-weather gear and equipment when extremely low overnight temperatures are forecast, was launched in 2019.

The response, involving several city agencies, nonprofit partners and health care providers, includes expanding overnight shelter capacity and providing transportation for those seeking shelter. The city also suspends enforcement of its camping ban on public property in dangerous weather conditions.

Proactive patrols and outreach are conducted by the city's Alternative Response Unit, first responders and city park rangers, who offer transportation to those willing to seek shelter. People in need of acute medical care are taken to Christus St. Vincent Regional Medical Center and other medical facilities, and homeless shelters including Consuelo's Place and St. Elizabeth Shelters and Supportive Housing increase their services.

Libraries, recreation facilities and senior centers also provide space where residents can stay warm on freezing cold days.



Lacey Smith, from left, Ben Steinbach and Lexus Zarbok lower a roof onto a Pallet shelter Friday at Agape House.

Nathan Burton/The New Mexican

Other organizations also ramp up their outreach services for the homeless, including Street Homeless Animal Project and Chaplain Joe's Street Outreach. Joe Dudziak, founder of Chaplain Joe's, died last month, but others involved with the nonprofit he founded have said they will continue to provide sleeping bags and other cold-weather supplies to the homeless this winter.

Hammond-Paul said the city's main role is coordinating services among a network of care providers, so organizations can better share resources.

Pop-up shelter sites

Temperatures this week are not close to the Code Blue threshold but are beginning to tick downward, with nighttime lows in the 30s and precipitation forecast throughout the week, including a chance for snow in the mountains.

Santa Fe temperatures this month have been mild compared to last November, when an early snowstorm buried the region under feet of snow and knocked out power to thousands of residents.



Ben Steinbach helps install a Pallet shelter at Agape House on Friday.

Nathan Burton/The New Mexican

The Santa Fe area saw little snow for much of the following winter but experienced bitterly cold temperatures in January, when nighttime lows fell to below 10 degrees. The city partnered with the American Red Cross, local faith groups and the Santa Fe Farmers Market Institute to boost overnight shelter capacity, an initiative city officials said potentially saved lives, with pop-up shelters hosted at the Farmers Market Pavilion in the Railyard, Zia United Methodist Church on Governor Miles Road and the Unitarian Universalist community UU Santa Fe in the South Capitol area.

Hammond-Paul said two people died in the November 2024 snowstorm, and the city is not aware of anyone else who died of exposure last winter.

Though the city's goal this year is to prevent deaths from exposure, he noted workers involved in the response do not compel people to seek shelter if they choose not to.

"We don't force people to move, and we don't arrest people to go and spend the night in the drunk tank or anything like that," Hammond-Paul said. "There are limitations to what we can do to get people inside, but our goal is to have enough resources available to make sure that people who want to come inside are able to."

Pop-up shelter locations this winter could include city facilities such as the former Warehouse 21 teen center in the Railyard, a vacant building the city used as a temporary homeless shelter for several days in August, along with the parking lot of the Agape House homeless shelter on Cerrillos Road.

Mike Anderer, chief of operations at Urban Alchemy, said last week the nonprofit set up a Pallet shelter "community building" in the facility's parking lot in advance of colder weather.

While the city has Pallet shelters in storage for development of future communities of the individual micro shelter units, Anderer said Urban Alchemy owns the community unit and brought it to Santa Fe from a previous location in Los Angeles.

The size of four standard micro shelters, the community building can be used as space where people can congregate during the day in colder months and where people can sleep on cots during Code Blue nights, Anderer said in a recent interview.



Manuel Lucero at Urban Alchemy's Agape House on Friday.

Nathan Burton/The New Mexican

More protected spaces will be going up in the Agape House parking lot over the next several weeks, along with heat lamps, he added.

Urban Alchemy converted the lot into what it describes as an “oasis,” where homeless people can gather outdoors.

Testing emergency response

The nonprofit responded to the city’s call for organizations to provide “emergency case management and overnight supervision services” at pop-up emergency shelters on Code Blue nights. Proposals to provide the service are under evaluation, according to the city’s procurement dashboard.

The project has a budget of \$30,000, which the request for proposals states could be split between multiple recipients.

Assisting with Code Blue operations also is part of the scope of work included in Urban Alchemy's contract with the city for street outreach services. Anderer said the additional contract would cover costs for overnight staff.

The need for additional shelter capacity in the city, even on warmer nights, is evident in the number of people on a waiting list for beds at Agape House; as of last week, the waitlist stretched to 114 people, Anderer said.



From left, Lexus Zarbok, Nathaniel Saine and Lacey Smith install a Pallet shelter on Friday at Agape House. The new modular shelter will serve as a community room that will provide overnight services during "Code Blue" events this winter when nighttime temperatures dip below 15 degrees.

Nathan Burton/The New Mexican

Kyle Morgan, interim director for the city's Office of Emergency Management, said along with assisting people in need on Code Blue nights, the response to extreme cold is an opportunity to test the city's preparedness as part of an ongoing effort to strengthen emergency management capabilities.

"Code Blue requires the same coordination skills as any major disaster; we're doing mass care, we're doing sheltering, we're doing intensive, multi-agency operations, resource management. ... It's a real emergency response," Morgan said.

At the same time, he noted, "we're using it as a training opportunity to build citywide emergency capabilities in an effort to expand our broader disaster capabilities. The goal really is doing two good things at once."

Correction: an early version of this story incorrectly described the Santa Fe Farmers Market as the host of a pop-up emergency shelter for the homeless last winter. The Santa Fe Farmers Market Institute, the nonprofit partner that owns the Farmers Market Pavilion, hosted the shelter.

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