

‘It takes one crisis’

Upper Valley winter shelters gear up for the season

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Zadiah Eisenberg, the pastoral community connections coordinator at Trinity Church in Claremont, N.H., sets up the church's Warm Welcome Shelter on Monday, Dec. 1, 2025, in Claremont. The shelter opened that night for the season for unhoused people. JENNIFER HAUCK / Valley News



ammy Dashnaw and her daughter, Elizabeth Keefe, 16, of Claremont, N.H., volunteer at the Trinity Church's Warm Welcome Shelter on Monday, Dec. 1, 2025, in Claremont. It was the first night the shelter was open for the season. Dashnaw and her family have been unhoused in the past, living in a tent in the winter. Dashnaw now has an Associate of Applied Science in Human Services degree, and a LNA and works at a nursing home. Dashnaw likes volunteering at the shelter. "I hope it keeps me humble and want to remember what I came from," she said. JENNIFER HAUCK / Valley News

By LUKAS DUNFORD

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CLAREMONT — Tammy Dashnaw has clawed herself out of homelessness four times.

In 2006, as Dashnaw was on her way to work on Route 12A in Plainfield when a Hyundai Sonata crossed into her lane, ramming into the car she was in.

After largely missing 14 months of her life “stuck in bed trying to relearn how to walk,” Dashnaw blew through a \$100,000 settlement from the accident — largely due to her lack of financial preparedness having been a child in the foster system, she said.

Following this, she and her daughter spent four months in a family shelter in Claremont operated by Southwestern Community Services, a Keene-based nonprofit that assists low income people and families. She saw the shelter as a means to an end.

“Shelters, to be honest, they’re crappy,” said Dashnaw, who now lives in Claremont. “They’re not meant to be a five-star resort.”

“They’re meant to provide you a safe haven — get you up off the street,” said Dashnaw. “You go there, you sleep, you get up, you go look for jobs or you participate in work-readiness.”

She now regularly volunteers at the Claremont Warm Welcome Shelter housed in Trinity Church shelter beside Broad Street Park, which opened for the season on the the first of December, a month earlier than last year. It will close for the year on March 31.

Volunteering here “would be a constant reminder of where we were once upon a time,” she said next to her 16-year-old daughter, Elizabeth Keefe, who has been homeless alongside her mother. “And it would allow us to spend time together,” she said on the shelter’s opening night on Monday.

With blizzards already coming to the region, other Upper Valley shelters are trying to open as soon as possible. The Lebanon Winter Shelter, owned by the city of Lebanon and contracted to the White River Junction-based nonprofit Upper Valley Haven, is aiming to open in the next two to three weeks for its third season.

St. John’s Episcopal Church in Randolph is also planning to open its warming shelter within the month for nights with inclement weather. The plan is to have a telephone number that, when called, will say if the shelter is open on a given night, which depends on weather and volunteers.

Shelter organizers at St. John’s have yet to determine what constitutes inclement weather.

Last season in Lebanon

The Lebanon winter shelter on Mechanic Street is preparing to open for its last season later this month.

The Lebanon shelter, which operates in a city-owned building and is run by the Upper Valley Haven, pushed its opening date for the season back a week to the week of Dec. 22 due to difficulty finding a full set of staff for every day of the week. The shelter will close around mid-April.

It will open when it is finished training its total of seven or eight employees, with the first shift from 5 p.m. to midnight and a second shift from midnight to 8 a.m.



Hartford Fire Marshall Tom Peltier, left, and Deputy Fire Marshall Kenny Smith, middle, talk with project superintendent Greg Collins, of Estes and Gallup, right, during a walk-through of the Upper Valley Haven's low barrier shelter, under construction in White River Junction, Vt., on Tuesday, Oct. 29, 2025. The Haven raised more than \$10.2 million to fund construction and an anticipated five years of operational costs at the building. JAMES M. PATTERSON / Valley News

The Lebanon shelter will be replaced next year by a new year-round, 24-hour shelter and resource center the Haven is currently constructing at 608 North Main St. in White River Junction, formerly 25,000 Gifts.

The new building's second floor is set to hold 20 shelter beds, and the first floor will house day services "to help people find housing, get connected to services (and) have other services come in to help people where they are," Michael Redmond, the Haven's former director, said in late November, just before he left the organization.

The Lebanon winter shelter's first season of operation was 2024.

Consistently operating at full capacity of its 14 beds, the shelter served 73 different people last year, Lebanon Director of Health and Human Services Lynne Goodwin said in a phone interview on Monday.

The winter shelter is low-barrier, meaning that there is no requirement for a background check, or identification.

Additionally, “you don’t need to be sober (and) you can have a pet dog,” Redmond said. “It’s kind of very open to whoever is in need.”

On a first-come, first-serve basis, the shelter provides guests with hot dinners, breakfasts to-go, showers, hygiene products, assistance with housing applications, paramedic services provided by the city and referrals to other community organizations.

However, the Haven plans to move away from first-come, first-serve by partnering with TLC — a Claremont-based nonprofit that provides aid to children, youth and families in New Hampshire — to have drop-in sign-ins in the afternoon.

The Haven partnered with TLC so that people don’t have to line up for multiple hours outside at a busy intersection to increase their chances of getting a bed, Goodwin said.

The last overdose at the Lebanon Winter Shelter was two years ago, and ambulances coming to the site have been for medical emergencies, despite some resident’s assumptions, Goodwin said.

Last year, there were 66 emergency response calls to the shelter, almost 40% of which were health related, according to Lebanon’s website. Of the calls, 18% had to do with arrests, assaults and fights.

Lebanon Police Chief Phillip Roberts has no specific safety concerns for the upcoming year, but the department has been preparing over the past few months, he wrote in an email on Friday. The department has recently “been working to strengthen coordination between social services, law enforcement, and emergency responders to ensure the safety of shelter guests, shelter staff, the surrounding neighborhood, and the broader community,” Roberts wrote.

As the new shelter will be in White River Junction, Roberts declined to comment on it. Hartford Chief of Police Constance Kelley did not respond in time for deadline.

Lebanon allocated almost \$170,000 last year to operate the shelter, according to the city’s website. Lebanon also used \$52,000 from the state of Vermont as over 35% of the shelter’s guests last winter were Vermonters, the website says.

Most people coming to the Lebanon shelter are “local folks,” Goodwin said, “not from Manchester or Nashua.”

The city budget for 2026 includes \$120,000 for shelter operations and \$14,400 for property-related expenses, according to Lebanon’s website. The State of Vermont has also approved \$66,000 for operations at the shelter. The budget is lower this upcoming year because the shelter will not be open in December of 2026, as the year-round shelter will have opened at that point, Goodwin said.



Addison Hadlock shovels her driveway in Wilder, Vt., on Tuesday, Dec. 2, 2025. "There's no reason to be shoveling the snow when it's this little," she said. Getting an early start on snow removal was an effort at stress relief, she said, and will ensure she can get out of the driveway while waiting for her appointment to have winter tires put on her car. JAMES M. PATTERSON / Valley News

In January of 2025, Lebanon spent just under \$13,000 on motel rooms for unhoused people, up from the previous winter's \$10,000, according to a January city manager update.

The shelter overflow program also received funding from Dartmouth Health for New Hampshire residents, while the Haven provided funding for Vermonters in motels.

There were 21 people without shelter on the night of Jan. 22 — up six from the year prior, according to Grafton County's 2025 point-in-time count, an annual survey taken to accurately gauge the number of people experiencing homelessness.

The higher count this year points to a persistent and growing problem.

The increase in homelessness in Lebanon illustrates a larger trend in Grafton County and the surrounding region — which is largely correlated with increasing housing costs, according to a 2023 study published in the *Cureus Journal of Medical Science*.

More people are also experiencing homelessness across the Twin States. New Hampshire's number of homeless people also increased from 1,445 in 2015 to 2,245 in 2024, according to the Housing and Urban Development federal agency.

In Vermont, which has the fifth highest rate of homelessness in the nation, 3,386 people were found to be homeless in 2025, a 200% increase from 2020, according to the Housing & Homelessness Alliance of Vermont.

Expansion in Randolph

At St. John's Episcopal Church in Randolph, at least one bed has been open near-continuously since the 1970s. The bed currently sits between toys and picture books in an otherwise unused kids' corner.

This year, the church plans to open a low-barrier shelter that allows for up to 10 people, said licensed lay preacher and shelter organizer Linda Runnion.

Two years ago, the organizers of the St. John's shelter saw that there were five or six people in the community who would "definitely utilize" the shelter, which they did, said Casey Reiboldt, who also provides people with housing counseling and connections as Capstone's area housing counselor. Capstone is a Barre-based nonprofit that provides community and individual aid for positive social change.

When the Randolph warming shelter opened two years ago, Runnion and often one of two volunteers working the shelter, alongside Reiboldt.

Reiboldt and Runnion took the initiative to open the winter shelter as part of their work on Randolph's emergency housing council, Runnion said. The council is made up of individuals, organizations and churches to provide shelter for people in and around Randolph.

They were not able to open the shelter last year due to volunteer shortage, but have made a more coordinated effort to get volunteers by word of mouth and online, Runnion said.

The church offers dinners, breakfasts, bathrooms, towels and toiletries to its guests, though it does not allow pets.

Alongside volunteer difficulties, connecting with people who might use the shelter has been an issue.

Two years ago, when the church first opened as a winter shelter, the group wasn't able to get more than two people on a given night, Runnion said.



Volunteers Matt Maki, left, and TJ Pray inspect the bathrooms at the Warm Welcome Shelter at Trinity Church in Claremont, N.H., on Monday, Dec. 1, 2025. This is the second year the church has had a shelter during the cold months for unhoused people. JENNIFER HAUCK / Valley News

“The word wasn't out, and we didn't do a very good job of publicizing it,” she said. “So now we're making more of a concerted effort.”

While the shelter might not fill all 10 spots every night, “its nice to know we have them if we need them,” Reiboldt said.

“Hope we can get some customers this year,” Runnion said.

Apparent need in Claremont

Claremont’s low-barrier shelter seasonal shelter opened on the first of December, a month sooner than last year.

Trinity Church opened its doors as a low-barrier shelter in January 2024 after ministering to someone who later died from exposure to the cold, said Zadiah Eisenberg, Trinity Episcopal Church’s Warm Welcome Center director.

In the past two years, one person died from a fire because they were sleeping in their truck, and another froze to death in their car, said Eisenberg, the director of the shelter’s newly-formed managerial board. “So the need is very apparent.”

Last year, 65 distinct individuals stayed at the shelter, ranging from around 21 to 80 years old. The shelter averaged around 12 people per night with a maximum of 22 on a single night. To reach 22 in a single night, some guests left as others came in as the maximum occupancy was 20.

Two years ago, the shelter could sleep up to 15 people, which was increased to around 20 last year and, finally, to 24 this year. However, the staffing and funding for this season aren’t certain enough to guarantee that the shelter remains open, Eisenberg said.

The Warm Welcome Shelter is funded by mostly small donations from individuals and family foundations. There are also larger donations from organizations such as the Woodstock Area Jewish Community and St. Andrews in New London have each provided funding that will cover around 20% of the cost of operation. The group has a funding team that is working to raise the remaining 80%.

The cost of operation would be around \$115,000, if three staff work all shifts throughout the season, Eisenberg said. The shelter is open from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m., seven days a week.

As of Thursday, the shelter has \$20,000 in cash, said Elizabeth Lowell, who is on the newly-formed fundraising committee. The committee will make a concerted effort to raise money for the shelter.

Although no drugs (or weapons) are allowed in the church, people are not required to be sober to sleep in the parish hall with everyone else.

Following two non-fatal overdoses at the shelter last winter, one of which was in the bathroom, staff check the bathroom verbally every three to five minutes, Eisenberg said.

The shelter has a supply of the overdose reversal medication naloxone, also known by the brand name Narcan, and got an AED defibrillator from Dartmouth Health this year.

There are nine paid staff and around 40 volunteers with responsibilities ranging from welcoming guests to making laundry runs to a nearby laundromat.

Currently, more people are being interviewed for staff positions, and volunteers are continuously being trained by Eisenberg to work with vulnerable populations.

In addition to volunteering at the shelter, Dashnaw also works 110 hours per week as a licensed nurse assistant at NFI North, a Contoocook, N.H.,-based mental and behavioral health care provider.

She also picks up shifts at nursing homes and through the online health care platform Clipboard – largely to afford basic expenses and medical costs for her five children.

“I’m not homeless anymore, but I’m one job away from being homeless,” Dashnaw said. “And I don’t think people realize it takes one crisis.”