

# 'We're out here because of trauma': Being homeless in Utah in winter during COVID-19

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Feb. 14, 2021

<https://www.ksl.com/article/50076212/were-out-here-because-of-trauma-being-homeless-in-utah-in-winter-during-covid-19>

SALT LAKE CITY — It's 39 degrees and sunny at the 7-Eleven on the corner of 100 South and 300 East; there is a patchwork of blankets scattered across the grass. Wrapped in those blankets are Utah's unhoused.

It's not uncommon for those who are experiencing homelessness to sleep during the day.

"It's so cold during the day, we go find the sun and we sleep; that makes us look lazy. You know, we're exhausted, we're starving, we're hungry, we're angry, we're lonely, we're tired," Sunny Sparkman said.

She added that the other night she had walked all night to stay warm.

Utah's previous approaches and solutions

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development statistics in 2019, there are 2,789 people experiencing homelessness either temporarily or long-term in Utah on any given night.

Utah was once hailed as a national model for reducing chronic homelessness by 91 percent in 2015, but that number was misleading. A 2018 performance audit of Utah's Homeless Services revealed that although matters did improve, the data displaying a significant drop in the number of chronically homeless people could be attributed to the changes made in the methods used to count chronic homelessness.

"We found it impossible to evaluate the state's success over time in serving that critical population," wrote the auditors.

Now the state is still grappling with how to best meet the needs of this group and navigate some of the complicating factors. Some promising ideas have emerged, including homeless resource centers and other temporary housing options, but state officials still have some roadblocks to navigate.

A public analysis report by the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute pointed to several factors including communication gaps and no statewide plan or comprehensive budget — all issues that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among other recommendations, the same report suggested that creating a Utah Homeless Council and a Utah Homeless Services Officer within the Governor's Office of Management and Budget would be beneficial as Utah currently doesn't either, and the current leadership structure is "confusing."

The audit and public analysis report come just three years after Utah launched Operation Rio Grande in August 2017 as a solution to end homelessness. The operation was a three-phase plan of improving public safety through law enforcement measures, supporting those with mental illness and drug addiction through court-mandated treatment, and preparing individuals to connect with income that leads to housing. The intended key measures of the plan were to lower the length of time spent in shelters and increase successful exits from the shelter to housing.

But it was met with some criticism. For instance, the American Civil Liberties Union released a report in 2019 entitled "Endgame for Operation Rio Grande," pointing to the longer term and short term consequences of the operation. The report called the operation a "flawed model" stating that its operational and policy mistakes intensified the burdens of those suffering from homelessness.

#### Homelessness during COVID-19

Sparkman, 48, has been unsheltered for the past several months for the second time. She said that before she had become unsheltered, she had suffered through a relationship hardship.

"But I struggled because I went into a shelter. And I utilized that program and the resources, but the time ran out; there was no housing for me," said Sparkman.

Shelter officials said that there is no time limit for staying in the shelter. Vouchers for stays outside of the shelters, such as motels, can expire.

Sparkman briefly exited homelessness but returned shortly after. Her return isn't uncommon: state data shows that 23.43% of people who exit homelessness return in less than six months.

Shelters are trying to meet the needs of the unhoused, but getting shelter can be even more difficult if there are COVID-19 outbreaks.

You want these people to come inside because it's freezing temperatures, but also you're limited in the capacity to house that many people because of the pandemic

—Sue Ativalu

"You want these people to come inside because it's freezing temperatures, but also you're limited in the capacity to house that many people because of the pandemic," said Sue Ativalu, Volunteer for America's vice president of program operations.

"And it's like OK, what's worse, possibly getting COVID or getting exposed to COVID, or being on the street and the trauma that happens to folks on the street?"

The Salt Lake County Health Department has reported 15 outbreaks with 754 positive COVID-19 cases at homeless resource centers in the county from March to February.

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Photo: Salt Lake County Health Department

"We're collaborating with Volunteers of America and other service providers," said Michelle Flynn, executive director of The Road Home. "We try and have consistency throughout our programs so we can ensure that we have low barriers and good access for people who are in need. Sometimes during the last few months, different facilities have temporarily shut down bringing new people in if we have seen surges in COVID-19."

Flynn said the shelters then quickly reopened due to the health risk the cold could present to unsheltered individuals.

But even as shelters have created additional capacity to help meet unsheltered people's needs, Sparkman says she won't go because she's nervous about getting separated from her new partner, Reggie, who is also unsheltered.

The dilemma of unhoused couples

"So they're breaking up our family when we need each other; like, who wants to sleep alone? When everything's already hurting so bad, you know, we're out here because of trauma," Sparkman said.

Sparkman and her partner have been grouping together with another couple on the street.

Briana Calvin, who is pregnant, and Jason Calvin became unsheltered after Jason lost his job at the airport at the onset of COVID-19. Before the pandemic, the couple said they owned a home in Sandy and had everything they could want.

"But we lost it," said Jason Calvin.

"It's a paycheck; one bad paycheck," chimed Sparkman.

After losing his job and their home, the Calvins began living in their truck, which was also taken, along with all their belongings inside. The Calvins say that since Briana isn't far along enough in her pregnancy, family shelters won't accept the couple, ultimately separating them.

"They don't want to help us because I won't leave him. What? Why would I leave him out here alone? Why would he leave me out here? Why do they want to separate us?" asked Briana Calvin.

Current solutions and approaches amid COVID-19

The Road Home's executive director Flynn said that a community should have a variety of low-barrier shelters and support available, but must also continually work to connect with unhoused individuals to prevent communication gaps. For instance, despite Briana Calvin's belief, couples without children are welcome at the Gail Miller Resource Center and the Midvale Family Resource Center is designed for families with children, The Road Home's executive director Flynn said. Women who are in their last month of pregnancy are accepted into the shelter with their partners.

Flynn pointed to current measures implemented through shelter partnerships such as shuttle vans, street outreach when encampments are cleared by law enforcement, and a central line that can help unhoused individuals find an open bed as methods used to help close those gaps.

"Despite all of these new and continually improving methods, we know that we are not always meeting the needs of people who are in crisis," Flynn said. "As things change, we work hard to get the word out through all of these partner agencies and programs."

Part of that coordination between partner agencies includes instituting temporary shelters and new housing programs. For instance, Salt Lake County's Emergency Shelter and Overflow capacity plan for Winter 2020-21 include approximately 200 new temporary and permanent spots for unsheltered individuals at similar or reduced capacity. Many of those spots come from partnerships with hotels in programs such as the Stay Home, Stay Safe Motel.

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Photo: End Utah Homelessness

To receive a voucher and qualify for programs like the Stay Home, Stay Safe Motel one must have an underlying health condition outlined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and health department or be aged 60 years or older.

Many of the programs like the Stay Home, Stay Safe Motel are a part of the Salt Lake Valley's Coalition to End Homelessness initiatives. The coalition was created in April 2019 and is a group of community members whose goal is to end homelessness in Salt Lake Valley through, "a system-wide commitment of resources, services, data collection, analysis and coordination among all stakeholders," according to the group's website. Board members of the coalition include representatives from the shelters like The Road Home or the Volunteers of America facilities.

Salt Lake City Mayor Erin Mendenhall recently acknowledged the system's failings as winter arrived in response to Salt Lake City Council adopting an ordinance to enact temporary land use for an overflow shelter. The overflow shelter, the Airport Inn Hotel at 2333 W. North Temple, opened this month and is geared toward couples.

"For the second winter in a row, our City has had to help fill gaps in the homeless services system. The system of determining sufficient winter shelter as it currently stands is dysfunctional and a disservice to the service providers, residents and businesses in the area, and most of all, to individuals experiencing homelessness," Mendenhall said in a press release.

"I empathize with Salt Lake Valley Coalition to End Homelessness, which has been given the charge of the state legislature to secure winter shelter without the staffing, funding, or the authority to actually do so. It's an untenable situation that is set up to fail. We must do better."

Staying safe or staying warm

But not every unhoused person has access or qualifies for these programs, and some fear contracting COVID-19 in shelter spaces. Sparkman, who's had health issues, is one of those concerned about the possibility of being exposed to the virus. That concern has been heightened since her partner's grandmother recently died of COVID-19.

So they're breaking up our family when we need each other; like, who wants to sleep alone? When everything's already hurting so bad, you know, we're out here because of trauma

—Sunny Sparkman

Sparkman said she also fears seeking treatment for COVID-19 symptoms due to the quarantine protocols. Her voice was thick with emotion as she explained that if she were to seek treatment at the hospital, she and her partner might be separated without a way to find one another. Quarantine protocols could last up to 12 days and the couple don't have phones.

She's also concerned about hygiene, Sparkman pulled up her sleeves to display her hands which shook in the cold.

"I can't go in there and use their bathroom. I can't wash my hands," she said, gesturing to the 7-Eleven. "How am I supposed to not get COVID when I can't even go somewhere and wash my hands?"

In a recent weekly state of Utah pandemic update, Utah Department of Health state epidemiologist Dr. Angela Dunn said they're working at a state and local level to address congregate living and vulnerable populations such as the unsheltered.

"I have to say especially with our homeless population, the Johnson & Johnson vaccine gives us a lot more flexibility to vaccinate these vulnerable populations because it's a single dose and it doesn't require being frozen," said Dunn. "So as Johnson & Johnson becomes more available, we will be able to start actively vaccinating our most vulnerable including our homeless."

Last Thursday, Johnson & Johnson formally asked U.S. regulators to approve its single-dose vaccine. If approved, it would be the third vaccine approved for use in the country, along with Pfizer and Moderna's vaccines.

But to other unsheltered individuals, the temperatures are more concerning than the risk of getting COVID-19.

"There's things you have to worry about first, mine's being warm," said Jason Calvin.

To stay warm the group said they break into empty buildings and houses, or tents if they can find them. Staying together as a family to keep warm.

"We've got these apartment complexes everywhere in this city sitting empty. For \$5,000 a month, you can rent a one-bedroom. And for a nickel a day, I get the sidewalk," Sparkman said.

In Utah, the Fair Market Rent reports that in order to afford a one-bedroom apartment, a worker has to work 90 hours per week at minimum wage. The average rental rate for a one-bedroom in Salt Lake County is \$1,001.

And that's what's the problem is: that nobody's making solutions. They're putting Band-Aids on things and that Band-Aids fall off eventually

—Briana Calvin

Sparkman looked resigned, acknowledging that she didn't have any solutions. Sparkman looked at Briana Calvin, and everyone else gathered in a small circle outside of the 7-Eleven.

Briana nodded continuing Sparkman's sentiment saying, "And that's what's the problem is: that nobody's making solutions. They're putting Band-Aids on things and that Band-Aids fall off eventually."

A list of emergency shelters can be found on Salt Lake County's website.