

St. Paul's homeless find shelter during coldest weather

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Last winter when it felt like it was "negative 167" degrees outside, Willie Ray said he was toasty in his Minneapolis apartment.

During this year's recent cold snap, the 52-year-old man is homeless.

He lost his apartment three months ago after child support obligations reduced his monthly disability check, leaving too little left to cover the rent.

He's spent most nights since at the Dorothy Day Center in downtown St. Paul. Despite finding himself homeless for the first time in his life, Ray says he feels "blessed" that he has a safe place to sleep. He added that he feels particularly fortunate that the center offers him a place to spend his days when the temperatures tank.

Minnesota officials have urged residents to dress warmly and stay inside the past few days as temperatures have dropped well below zero. That's harder to do when you are homeless. Places that offer shelter, such as Dorothy Day, allow people to escape the cold.

A one-day count in 2012 by the Wilder Research Center found more than 10,000 homeless in Minnesota. As many as 300 take shelter at Dorothy Day when it's cold.

Dorothy Day typically requires clients to leave several times throughout waking hours so that staff can clean and get the site ready for the next meal. When temperatures plummet below zero, though, the doors stay open 24 hours a day, according to Gerry Lauer, senior program manager at the Dorothy Day Center and housing programs at Mary Hall and St. Christopher's Place.

"Wow, it's been torturous out, you know," Ray said of the cold while at Dorothy Day on Monday. "To be able to be here, to have access to eating, sleeping, getting out of the cold, it's just unexplainable what a blessing it is."

He was passing part of the time Monday paging through the King James version of the Bible, a gift from his brother in 1993 that he keeps wrapped in a plastic grocery bag inside his backpack. Other days he rides the light-rail to kill time or goes to the library in Minneapolis near his doctor's office. Ray had back surgery in 2013 after falling at his job stocking boxes at a warehouse.

"It's too cold to go anywhere now," he said.

Another man at Dorothy Day on Monday said that he likes to sit inside and "talk ... or sit in the corner and

observe people," when low temperatures mean that the doors stay open around the clock.

He said winter makes life particularly difficult. The man, whose name is Orville, asked to have his last name withheld because he is embarrassed about being homeless.

He lost his St. Paul home about a year ago after he lost his job at a local bar.

"There is really no place to go in downtown St. Paul during the day -- you're not wanted," he said. "There is no access to public restrooms... When the library closed, it put a lot of us in a bad spot because that's where we would go during the day... As far as the skyway, they are not that friendly to you, so you have to keep moving, keep maneuvering," Orville said.

"In the summer, it's different. You can go to a park, You can sleep outside ... there is no way you could sleep outside tonight," he added.

Orville and Ray were among dozens of people sitting on chairs set up inside Dorothy Day on Monday afternoon. Some looked at cellphones, others chatted with people nearby; many just sat.

Several got to their feet when a woman brought in a box full of neon orange socks and started handing them out. A moment later, another box emerged with deep purple hats.

Donations of hats, gloves and scarves are key during the winter, Lauer said. People often lose such items and don't have money for replacements.

While the center typically sees its overnight shelter numbers climb during cold spells, the days can fluctuate, Lauer added. Many who work and live nearby, but visit the center for meals, stay home when it gets this cold.

He said he is looking forward to the opening of Dorothy Day's two new sites, which will give the homeless a warm place 24 hours a day in downtown St. Paul.

The first facility is expected to open in December.