

■ U T A H C O U N T Y ■

WINTER RESPONSE

T A S K F O R C E

Utah County Winter Response Plan Highlights “Ecosystem of Service”

Executive Summary

Building on decades of effective homeless-related services that have been provided in Utah Valley by a homegrown ecosystem of local providers, the 2024-2025 Utah County Winter Response Plan offers warm shelter for up to 75 persons a night. It does so primarily through a rotating series of “warming centers” that was piloted last year. From October 15, 2024, to April 30, 2025, the rotation will generally be as follows: Monday and Tuesday at The Genesis Project Provo, Wednesday and Friday through Sunday at the Utah County Red Building, located in unincorporated Utah County, and Thursday at the Provo Seventh-day Adventist Church. Participants are offered a UTA passes to help them get from one warming center to another—and to otherwise travel. Other local entities provide warm meals, a food pantry, job training, addiction recovery, transitional and permanent housing, and other services, so warming centers will be primarily a place to sleep, but professional staff will be on hand to connect individuals with those other services. Updated information on warming centers will be available at 801-441-1993, Additionally, 211 is a comprehensive one-stop phone number, website, and app hosted by United Way of Utah County that will contain information about warming centers and opportunities to volunteer at them.

The Utah County Winter Response Task Force has unveiled its Winter Response Plan for the 2024-2025 winter. The plan was recently approved by the state and promises to build on decades of effective homeless services within Utah County. “There’s a robust ecosystem of service providers that have been operating in Utah County since the late Sixties,” says Utah County Commissioner and Task Force Chair Brandon Gordon. “We’ve been quietly helping people climb out of homelessness for decades. This winter-response plan with warming centers is just the latest addition to that ecosystem of services.”

Indeed, close coordination has been a hallmark of service providers in Utah County, says Heather Hogue, director of the local Continuum of Care. “We’re constantly looking for gaps in services and how we can best fill those. Maybe even more importantly, we talk regularly about individuals experiencing homelessness, by name, and try to work together to deliver to them what they need most.”

When it came time to prepare a Winter Response plan, that pattern of close collaboration made the work of the task force all the easier. “We’ve worked harmoniously to get this done,” says task force member Karen McCandless, CEO of Community Action Services and Food Bank. “It’s not that we all see every issue exactly the same; it’s that we respect each other and share a strong desire to serve the common good and to serve those experiencing homelessness.”

State Homeless Coordinator Wayne Niederhauser served on the Utah County task force and agree “I commend the Utah County Winter Response Task Force for its outstanding work. The group was a pleasure to work with and delivered impressive results. The county has been proactive in addressing homelessness, providing a wide range of services for many years. This initiative is a significant and positive addition to those efforts.”

Examples of the services available in Utah County were included in the task force’s submission to the state (see An Ecosystem of Services handout.) Highlights include the following:

Founded in 1967 in Provo, Community Action Services and Food Bank in a recent single year distributed 3.7 million pounds of food, provided 1250 nights of homeless sheltering, prevented 100 evictions, and moved 52 households from homelessness to permanent housing.

Founded in 1967, Wasatch Behavioral Health offers free therapy, detox, and street outreach services to persons experiencing homelessness. Street outreach specialists indicate they know basically every individual experiencing homelessness in Utah County. When a new one arrives, they notice it and introduce themselves, seeking to quickly connect them to various local services.

Founded in 1971, the Provo City Housing Authority and its sister entity the Utah Regional Housing Authority own or manage 712 housing units and administer 883 rent vouchers for those in need, including those escaping homelessness.

Founded in 1998, the Food and Care Coalition provides hot meals to anyone who shows up, three times a day, offers 38 units of onsite transitional housing and 72 units of onsite permanent housing, together with a variety of wrap-around services including dental care and haircuts, through partner entities.

Plan details

The actual winter response plan is to house up to 75 individuals per night, primarily through a rotating series of warming centers, an idea that was piloted last year. “The stars of this program are the churches,” says Commissioner Gordon. “They did this on their own initiative last year. We can’t thank them enough for paving the way for this. This has been a great example of government working closely with non-profits to do something big. We could not have done this without them.”

Monday and Tuesday, individuals at The Genesis Project Provo, which began hosting all-night movie nights on cold nights about a decade ago, to keep people warm. Thursday night will be at the Provo Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the remaining nights, Wednesday and Friday through Sunday, will be at the Utah County Red Building, located in unincorporated Utah County between Provo and Springville. The warming centers will

operate from October 15, 2024 through April 30, 2025. Hours are from 9 p.m. to 8 a.m. Children will not be housed at warming centers. Instead, they and their parents will be provided with hotel or other accommodations.

Individuals arriving at a designated warming center will be offered a UTA pass to help them get from one warming center to another—and to help facilitate other needed travel. Sleeping mats, blankets, and snacks and drinks will be provided, but warm meals will not. “It’s been very important to us that warming centers complement the services already provided in Utah County,” says Commissioner Gordon. “The Food and Care Coalition has been providing three warm meals a day for a long time. We will encourage folks to go there for meals.”

But professional staff will be on hand at the warming centers to help connect people to a variety of services. “I was at the warming centers last year,” says Fred Sheehan from Wasatch Behavioral Health. “I know most of the homeless in the county because that’s what I do, street outreach. But if there was someone at the warming centers that I hadn’t met, I could be like, hey, I’m Fred, and just start talking. I can tell them, hey, it wasn’t that long ago I was homeless right here too. I know what it’s like for them. But I can tell them that Utah County has great services. Once I got connected with them, things got better and better. I got housing. I got help. And now it’s my job to help others get the exact same kind of help. Last year, a couple of the people I met at the warming centers actually decided to get help, and right now they’re housed. They went through the steps. It’s incredible. But that’s what this is all about. Helping people lift themselves out of homelessness—with our help, when they are ready.”

Isaac Paxman, the task force’s vice chair and Provo’s deputy mayor says that this year represented a shift. “We’ve heard repeatedly, from the state and from others, that efforts to help the homeless should be led by the county organization, and Commissioner Gordon has answered that call. We tried really hard to find churches or other facilities in other parts of the county to be warming centers; that was a goal of the task force, to spread this out more so that not everything was right here in Provo. In the end, Utah County was the one that stepped up, not just to lead the task force but to provide a facility on county land outside of our city. We greatly appreciate it. Commissioner Gordon has been a champion in all this.”

Volunteers needed

Although there will be professional staff members at the warming centers, there is also a need for 3-5 volunteers there at all times.

To volunteer [visit https://app.vomo.org/opportunity/warming-center](https://app.vomo.org/opportunity/warming-center)