

## Concern for homeless rises with temperature

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Homeless people line up last week for a meal at the Las Vegas Rescue Mission. Temperatures already have reached triple digits, causing concern about providing shelter in the summer months.

Photo by [Ralph Fountain](#).



Phillip Hollon, the residential services director for Catholic Charities, sits Thursday in the waiting room at their facility at 1501 Las Vegas Blvd. North. An air-conditioned shelter for the homeless will be open from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. each day, beginning July 1, or earlier, if temperatures become too extreme.

Photo by [Craig L. Moran](#).

As homeless advocate Linda Lera-Randle EI goes about her day, shuttling some of the community's most vulnerable citizens to shelters, doctor's appointments and drug treatment sessions, she pays close attention to the ever-increasing heat. And she worries.

"You figure how hot it is for us, and we are usually just dashing into our vehicles and into the store, in and out of air conditioning," the director of the nonprofit organization Straight from the Streets said of temperatures that already have reached triple digits. "Imagine what it's like living out there in it (the heat)."

Lera-Randle EI is particularly afraid of a repeat of last summer, which brought searing, record temperatures of up to 117 degrees and what she says was the highest number of heat-related homeless deaths in local history.

"I started tracking that in the mid-90s," she said. Last year's numbers "were the highest I've ever seen."

At least 12 homeless people died last summer of environmental heat stress or a combination of factors that included environmental heat stress, an "unusually high" number, said Assistant Clark County Coroner John Fudenberg.

Given the numbers -- on the temperature gauge and from the coroner's office -- Lera-Randle EI said an emergency summer day shelter scheduled to run July 1 through Sept. 30 at Catholic Charities isn't enough.

"There shouldn't be an issue of 'weather shelter,'" she said. "We need to shelter people year-round. The elements are a big part of being homeless. The weather can contribute to everything from allergies to skin cancer."

Catholic Charities received a \$99,649 grant from the Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition through its Committee on Homelessness this year to open the

air-conditioned shelter from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. each day at its campus on Las Vegas Boulevard and Foremaster Lane.

The shelter has chairs, a television, a library, restrooms and showers and can accommodate up to 100 men at a time. Women must seek day shelter elsewhere, such as at Shade Tree.

If temperatures become too extreme before July 1, contingency plans may be put into place, said Phillip Hollon, residential services director for Catholic Charities.

"I'm doing research to find out at what temperatures I should be concerned about people out on the street," he said, adding that the current standard for "extreme" heat is 105 degrees. "We certainly have the ability to open it (the shelter) up early."

Hollon said the agency's winter shelter plan was extended by two weeks this year because of cold temperatures through the end of March.

"We are not going to stand around and wait to do the right thing if the heat conditions are out there," he said. "We are going to get the homeless off of the streets."

But many of the valley's homeless tend to shun shelters, even in extreme weather. The 10 homeless men and two homeless women who died at least in part from the heat last year were found during July or August in the desert, in a dirt lot or next to area businesses and homes. Christopher Paul Schoenfeld, 41, was found dead Aug. 13 inside a drainage pipe. His cause of death was listed as "probable environmental heat stress."

The large number of heat-related deaths such as Schoenfeld's last year -- the first time a coordinated, formal effort was made to provide emergency day shelter -- shows the effort may not be working.

Part of the problem, Lera-Randle El said, is institutional.

"The system needs restructuring," she said. "You have to factor in other conditions besides homelessness. They (the homeless) may be ill, may be on medication. They may have children. Shelters need to have comprehensive case management, not just shelter."

Lera-Randle El also believes clustering most homeless centers in the "homeless corridor" near Catholic Charities is a problem.

"You can't just take a (homeless) person who's used to the northwest end of town, or Green Valley, where they are comfortable, pick them up and take them 20 miles away and put them there. That creates an issue."

The corridor is already overcrowded anyway, she said.

"If every homeless person stood up and said, 'Take me out of the heat,' we would be up the creek without a paddle. The fact is some of them aren't seeking shelter because they know we couldn't accommodate them if they wanted it."

Drug and alcohol problems also contribute to heat-related deaths. Three of last year's deaths were because of chronic alcoholism combined with environmental heat stress.

"Some (of the homeless) were intoxicated and passed out because of heat exposure," Fudenberg said.

Gloria Linneweh, who was homeless in Las Vegas for years, said "alcohol and the heat don't mix."

The 58-year-old former waitress, who said she never struggled with a substance abuse problem, was one of the first of the valley's homeless to benefit from a pioneering coalition of local nonprofit organizations designed to get "chronic" homeless people off the streets for good. She has been living in her own apartment for months.

She said she didn't really suffer from the heat while living on the streets.

"You would go to the park and sit in the shade," she said. "Volunteers would come by and give you fruit and water, so it wasn't like you would just be thirsty all day. It wasn't really that bad."

Linneweh would occasionally seek relief from the heat at the Las Vegas Library on Las Vegas Boulevard.

But mixing alcohol with the heat became a deadly problem for some of her fellow homeless, she said.

"If they knew better they wouldn't be thinking alcohol would quench their thirst."