

Salida struggles with homelessness

by Jan Wondra, Mail Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, January 18, 2017 8:56 am

Editor's note: This is the first in a series about housing issues in Chaffee County.

She sees those without homes every day.

"They come in and you can tell they're afraid to tell us they have children living in the car with them," said Loucinda Martin of the Caring & Sharing Resource Center in Salida. "They're afraid they'll lose their children. So it can be hard to get the numbers.

"Just this Monday, we had 29 families walk into the Resource Center looking for housing. When we registered them, we learned that those 29 families had 61 children. So 90 people – living in cars, living in makeshift shelters – trying hard to keep things going.

"It was a pretty typical day. We give them blankets, gloves, hats, scarves, things to keep warm, but we just don't have transitional housing for them."

As Colorado has grappled with the swiftly rising cost of housing, mountain communities with fewer resources than major metropolitan areas are trying to meet the local need. Mountain communities have typically cobbled together fragile safety nets of church food pantries and soup kitchens, donation centers who give out food, blankets and warm clothing.

Many have focused on low-income construction, such as the new project by Urban Inc. in Buena Vista, and building workforce housing, which has occurred in Breckenridge.

The problem, say housing experts, encompasses not just low-income housing but workforce housing and what the state has come to call "attainable housing" – absorbing no more than 30 percent of a family's income.

Accurate statistics on the actual number of families needing housing in Chaffee County are difficult to obtain. Those numbers would include the homeless who have lost homes due to crisis, those who have come to Chaffee County and found a job but not a home and those who have a roof of sorts over their heads but are crammed into inadequate space, are couch surfing or home-sharing.

"I don't know truthfully how many homeless we have here, said Chaffee Housing Trust Executive Director Read McCulloch. "I know it's going up. There are those who've found something, but not that meets what they need. There are families with four or more kids crammed into tiny homes."



Resource Center at Caring & Sharing

Loucinda Martin, who manages the Resource Center at Caring & Sharing, says the resource center has seen an increase in homeless families with children needing shelter and vouchers for food, laundry and gasoline.

The Caring & Sharing Thrift Store and its Resource Center, which includes some limited transitional housing, share space at 220 W. Fourth St. The effort is funded by several area churches and public donations.

"We can tell you how many people and families we see every day," said Martin. "But I don't know anyone who can tell you the number of those homeless, living in cars, in shacks, trying to hang on."

Martin said the number of individuals and families needing help has gone up in the past few years. Among homeless families, she sees both newcomers, brought here by jobs and who after months still can't find places to live, as well as people who grew up in the area.

"Our waiting list is a year long. Right now I have 30 families who need housing desperately, and that's typical," said Roxanne Merton, site manager for Riverbend Apartments at 1500 Holman Ave. "Our housing is at 40 to 50 percent AMI (Average Median Income). We have 30 units, and four of them are 40 percent AMI and the rest are at 50 (AMI)."

Riverbend Apartments qualifies people for low-income subsidies depending on the number of people in the apartment. For example, a one-bedroom unit could rent for \$553 per month and a two-bedroom at \$663 per month.

"We stay full because we're the only low-income entity that serves families and singles. The others focus on the elderly or disabled," said Merton. "When we have units available, we work our way down the list. People on the list sometimes find other housing or move out of the area, but mostly they've moved out of the area."

That housing solutions need to be found is critical, Merton said. "I think that we definitely need more affordable housing and family units. Do we want to keep these families? We have homeless people and families in situations who need housing immediately. Homelessness is stressful for children. Just a few weeks ago a family moved into Riverbend with three children that had been living in a tent."

"Most of the repeat families that I see, they're living in their car, in a tent," said Martin. "When it was brutally cold, they needed more blankets. We ran out of gloves, and at my own expense I went out and bought \$100 worth of gloves so those people could have something on their hands. For me here it is so hurtful to see this because we can't do more. We need housing."