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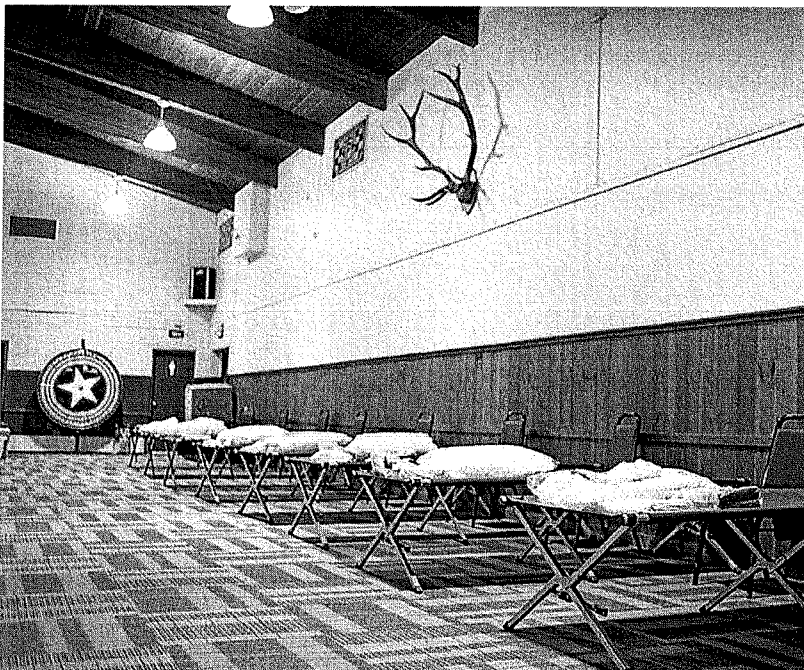
ONLINE

Friday, December 29, 2017

Rutland Elks switch to emergency mode

Rutland Herald | December 29, 2017

By KATE BARCELLOS
STAFF WRITER



The Elks building on Pleasant Street in Rutland has been set up as an emergency cold-weather shelter through the weekend. ROBERT LAYMAN / STAFF PHOTO

Rutland-area residents pressed for shelter with temperatures dropping well below zero will have another option, thanks to the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks and BROCC Community Action in Southwestern Vermont.

“I’m big on the benevolent part,” said Elks President Patrick Farley, whose lodge at 44 Pleasant St. is being converted into an emergency shelter because of the bitter cold. “I like to say ‘Best People On Earth.’ These people, they’re great people who volunteer and help get things done.”

The state’s Office of Economic Opportunity — part of the state Agency of Human Services — created an extreme cold weather

emergency shelter program last year, BROCC CEO Tom Donahue said.

“We wanted to work together to establish pilot shelter programs in Burlington and Rutland,” Donahue said. “They asked us if we would be willing to step up and head off the initiative here.”

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homeless residents into hotels and motels for protection from harsh winter weather.

But with the cold snap moving in during a vacation week when many rooms have been booked by vacationers, using the Elks club as a shelter fills the need for food and beds. Last year, the Elks facility was certified by the state fire marshal to house up to 40 occupants, Donahue said.

"We got great support through the city, fire department and mayor," Donahue said. "We'll have staff from BROC trained in de-escalation and emotional support techniques. We'll have volunteers every night, four people from BROC, two from the medical reserve core, one from Americore Vista, and Pat (Farley) will be here through New Year's."

With cots donated from the Red Cross, bedding provided by BROC, Farley's homemade chicken noodle soup and movie nights with popcorn, those seeking shelter at the Elks will be well-taken care of, Farley said.

BROC has donated dinner, and the Elks volunteered to provide breakfast.

"Tomorrow, I'll make eggs, bacon and coffee," Farley said. "I can't send them out into the cold without something to eat."

The shelter will be open every day through New Year's Eve from 4:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. The doors will then be locked to prevent any overcrowding in violations of fire-safety rules.

After breakfast, guests are encouraged to exit by 7 a.m., and the area will be prepped for another night's stay.

Donahue said he expects a full house through the weekend.

"I'd say we get around 20 people tonight," he said Thursday. "Apparently the state had people booked in hotels Tuesday through Thursday. Those rooms are booked with skiers through the weekend, so we could be full."

Farley said he's ready for a big crew at the shelter this weekend.

"I've been cooking at the Elks for 10-12 years," he said. "Forty people? That's a walk in the park."

BROC and the Elks are in contact with the Rutland City Police Department, which will notify any homeless people that the shelter is there.

"They will pick up anyone they know who is homeless and bring them here," Farley said.

Temperatures like this are serious business, Donahue said.

"When it gets this cold, it's frightening," he said. "We don't want anyone out with nowhere to go. The fact that it's an emergency makes it work for BROC, and we're ready to step up and solve this."

Farley said the Elks were eager to help in any way they could. "That's what we do here. The Elks help veterans, special needs, children, everybody. Maybe nice guys finish last, but we're OK with that."

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