



# Unsheltered Utah: A year in service

## A message from the executive board

As we approach the holiday season and begin to look back on the things that Unsheltered Utah has been able to accomplish as an organization through 2021, largely due to our incredible volunteers and our generous donors.

Many of those who have donated have also taken the opportunity to join us on a street outreach to see the way that we distribute goods to the individuals who have fallen through the cracks in the system and are left without safe shelter options. We would like to extend the invitation to any who have expressed interest in joining our efforts to join us in whatever capacity feels comfortable. For those who don't feel comfortable doing the boots on the ground work, there are many behind the scenes opportunities which are no less important than the outreach work: hygiene kit preparation, sorting inventory, preparing food, picking up donations, volunteering as a drop site location and delivering donated goods to one of our storage facilities for prompt usage, clean up crew after outreach or assisting with organizational back-end efforts.

The year has been a whirlwind of efforts to support the most basic physiological needs of the unsheltered neighbors in Salt Lake City and Ogden. At each formal outreach we provide an on-site meal, have bags available with grocery items to help people get through the week, we bring whatever seasonally appropriate clothing items we have available and any additional survival essentials we have gathered.

In 2021 we completed 37 Unsheltered Utah Street Outreach events, with three more scheduled in the remaining calendar year.

We have participated in several special events that directly correlate to the issues that we see: "We are all one vigil," celebrated the lives of those who have passed on and went unclaimed by family; Opioid overdose awareness day at the State Capitol, we showed up to support harm reduction policies that can help individuals get away from opioid use; we attended a Health Fair at Terra Health and Wellness, which allowed for discussion of alternative solutions including the use of medical cannabis cards to move away from opioids and created a partnership program with the donation of cards for indigent individuals; and we participated in a Jordan River Clean-up effort where we picked up litter along the river from kayaks to help minimize the risks for those who use the river for recreation.

Unsheltered Utah had boots on the ground volunteers assisting with physical moves from location to location as abatements have been posted in advance. We have watched camps break up into small pieces and have seen the increasing fear and sense of loss of community since those protective groupings have been disbanded.

As winter closes in again, the risks increase for our unsheltered clients. The chance of hypothermia decreases when they have adequate gear to protect against the elements: hats, gloves, scarves, warm socks, shoes without holes, coats, etc. Blankets, sleeping bags and tents are literal lifesavers.

We will continue to gather as many warm items as humanly possible to distribute to the individuals residing outdoors. Funding for propane, Sterno, hand warmers, etc. is always a challenge but these heat sources can help with warmth and food preparation, although there are always associated risks. We do our best to educate on best practices when distributing these items because just as we do not want to lose anyone to hypothermia, carbon monoxide poisoning is also a real possibility.

Unsheltered Utah has drop box locations at two commercial businesses as well as numerous volunteers are accepting donations throughout the wasatch front. These volunteers may pick up items, based on their personal availability. We are so appreciative of their willingness to help in that manner, and we would love to expand our donation network by offering more locations if volunteers and/or businesses would like to sign up.

Throughout 2021 we have had many ups and downs as we have felt the trauma our clients experience through harassment, loss of personal property and health declines due to stress; but we have also celebrated the joyous births of healthy babies, seen clients commit to sobriety through a variety of programs, have seen individuals find stable employment and begin to support themselves, and most importantly have seen folks band together to advocate for themselves and their basic human rights. We love every time we see steps of personal empowerment.

We look forward to working with you in the coming year and wish the happiest holidays to you and yours. There are plenty of opportunities to help this holiday season, we would love to work with you in helping our unsheltered neighbors have a little more peace of mind and support as we close out 2021.

## 2021 efforts

- Participated with the Salt Lake Valley Coalition to End Homelessness
- Coordinated with the VOA, The Road Home, Domestic Violence shelters, syringe exchange providers, homeless pet support organizations, and various other programs who serve the same clientele
- Became eligible to provide ID and Birth Certificate vouchers to cover the cost of replacement ID
- Opened up lines of communication; giving feedback and suggestions while engaging in in-depth discussions with civic leadership who are influential in decision making based on first-hand observations. (including: Salt Lake City Council Members, SLC County council members, Mayor Erin Mendenhall, Mayor Jenny Wilson, Rep. Eliason, Rep. Weiland, Andrew Johnston, and Wayne Neiderhauser)
- Received training through Utah Naloxone to be able to administer and distribute lifesaving naloxone to reverse opioid overdoses
- Helped unsheltered individuals participate in the Homeless Court program to clear old offenses and warrants.
- Acquired Food Handler Permit(s) to safely serve hot meals.
- Participated at the Opioid Overdose Awareness Day at the State Capitol
- Participated in the "We Are All One" vigil to honor those lost and unclaimed
- Participated in multiple memorial services for unsheltered relatives who died
- Assisted with moving numerous people as abatements arise
- Made arrangements for individuals with substance addiction issues for rehabilitation programs, sober living and through out-patient programs like SupeRad.
- Assisted families with minor children acquire transitional housing
- Assisted clients with housing vouchers and worked with landlords to provide housing
- Collaborated with Utah Crisis Food Response to get shelf-stable food items out to the unsheltered population for the past six months and will continue to do so through their two food drive efforts monthly.
- Received approval to act as a referring agent for unsheltered individuals to receive their ID replacements
- Held outreach distribution events at least three times per month
- Coordinated with other organizations to distribute excess supplies/inventory
- Coordinated transportation for important meetings, medical appointments, etc.
- Shared updates on the conditions unsheltered community members are facing through social media and the press





## Addressing myths and common misconceptions

### Why do we serve the people who aren't using shelter systems?

The shelters have been operationally full for over a year, the few beds that open up are available on a lottery basis and folks risk losing their personal property that they aren't allowed to bring into shelter systems—which is a significant gamble when a repeat bed is not guaranteed. We see individuals starting over with nothing but the clothes on their backs, often. When we have excess items following our planned outreach efforts we do also try to provide for those who are in-shelter programs.

### Are we enabling people to stay outside?

In a very practical way, yes. Our end goal is to help people survive. We provide all the gear we can to assist people in surviving in harsh outdoor conditions because there is no "inside" available to them. The state of Utah is admittedly several hundred beds short and the implemented overflow systems do not close that gap. So, while there is no other option it becomes our responsibility as conscientious members of society to remember the humanity of those who have less than us. However, we encourage the population to engage with housing providers and shelter staff to receive as many services as there are available to them.

### ...But aren't they criminals?

Many of the individuals we work with on the streets have pasts that aren't spotless, but many of the charges accrued while homeless are often matters of survival and directly reflect a lack of adequate resources. (Trespassing, camping tickets, public urination or defecation tickets, etc.) It is not our place to make judgements on the people and their circumstances that brought them to living on the street, we are often met with tremendous gratitude and appreciation for acknowledging that they are human and deserving of a chance. But, also on this note, it is imperative to note the stark contrast between the way that incarcerated individuals are treated with far more respect and stability than those individuals who are without homes.

Outreach work is essential to help folks with warrants and charges to simply access the court system, the lawyers, the required urinalysis or check ins with probation, etc. It is time consuming and costly to be in the criminal justice system, and often our clientele simply don't have the resources to meet court ordered requirements. Without help, we have seen folks fall further behind, lose access to housing resources, and fail to complete probation or parole.

On a related note, according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, deficit needs must be met in order to move on to growth needs. "Our most basic need is for physical survival, and this will be the first thing that motivates our behavior. Once that level is fulfilled the next level up is what motivates us, and so on."

Our focus is on the lowest tier of the pyramid: these are biological requirements for human survival, e.g. air, food, drink, shelter, clothing, warmth, and sleep. Social expectations for individuals will never be optimal if the most basic needs of the human body aren't being met. Once people are treated as human they begin to be able to see themselves as such and strive to improve themselves and their situations.

### ...With constant abatements does it even make a difference?

This is a harsh reality, abatements regularly interrupt the ability to survive on the street, but even knowing that some of the items we have provided will end up in a landfill by being scooped up with heavy machinery "cleaning" and "clearing" camps—does it make a difference? To each person who has their gear replaced, it does. To each person who lost everything they had it means the world. Does it feel wasteful and at times redundant? Of course. It is frustrating knowing that many of the generous donations will be destroyed, but if we don't replace items as often as we can some people will be left with nothing. We can't, in good conscience, allow that to happen. Freezing should not be a punishment for poverty.

The truth is our homeless population is growing all the time. The moratorium on evictions has now expired, many of the pandemic programs have also expired, and with the extreme housing shortage in Utah we know that we will see more homelessness than ever—including families with young children.

We will provide what we can to as many as we can for as long as we can.

### ...What about the tiny home village?

We are excited that there is a plan in place for the future construction of a space that will provide a transitional shelter option in a way that offers more privacy than the traditional communal space options, however, ground has not been broken and while intentions are great immediate action must be taken to help people right now. We love that there are progressive steps being taken that will assist individuals in getting back on their feet, but the situation at hand is a matter of helping people survive until those resources exist. The tiny home village that is currently planned does not meet the low barriers many of our clientele need to stay indoors, so we do not believe it will create housing for those with the most need.

### ...What about the prominence of addiction out on the street?

We see a great number of individuals who have substance abuse issues, but correlation isn't always causation. Many individuals didn't use drugs until they were living on the street and facing a number of daily traumas which then caused them to turn to self-medicating. Of course, others have battled addictions which did influence their inability to maintain stable housing. However, addictions are often a symptom of a larger issue: the lack of adequate mental health services.

We support a housing first model because it is incredibly challenging to get clean on the streets. We connect our clients with resources for harm reduction programs whenever possible, we also will seek out networking options to assist in getting folks into rehab programs when they are prepared to make that decision for themselves.

### ...What about the people who relapse?

Truthfully, sobriety is hard to attain when there is a substance disorder, but it isn't impossible. We know that relapse is simply part of the addiction cycle and that the biggest factor in success is what decisions are made following a relapse. We will continue to show up for the clients who fall off the wagon without judgement. We want to see them succeed, but the decisions will always be theirs. Just like individuals who use alcohol or drugs recreationally in their own homes—these are all choices. We don't get to make them for anyone else, however we will do whatever we can to support those who want to get clean.

### ... What about violence? Is it safe to visit the camps?

We love the population we serve. The vast majority of the time, our interactions with people experiencing homelessness are very positive. They actively work within their own community to ensure volunteers are safe.

There are community members experiencing severe mental health issues that we believe may not be entirely responsible for their actions. We have safety policies in place to protect our volunteers, and we address any issues of safety with highest priority to ensure our volunteers have a positive experience. We have ongoing, growing policy and safety rules that we update as we learn, and are happy to say that nobody has gotten hurt on any of our outreach activities. However, we encourage interested community members to volunteer with us or another established organization to create those relationships on the street, understand the culture and the dynamics, and provide the best chance for safety.

### ... That all sounds amazing, how can I help further?

We keep a list of ongoing needs on our website which change with the season and with our clientele's changing environment. We also try to make the very best use of monetary donations, putting our clients' needs first by using that money for critical survival gear that isn't often donated, like sleeping bags and tents. We also absolutely love new volunteers, we feel that face to face contact with our population on the street provides invaluable information to help destigmatize homelessness, understand addiction and recovery, and better help folks living outside.

<http://unshelteredutah.org/donate/>