

Illinois Valley homeless shelter director: 'We're going to be busy again' Homeless shelters open in Peru and Ottawa, brace for potential record need

By Tom Collins



Kim Ramos was on duty Christmas morning at the Peru homeless shelter. She counted eight families with 22 children along with 43 homeless individuals.

Ramos is day shift monitor for Public Action to Deliver Shelter and she'd never seen such a packed house.

"Every bed was spoken for," Ramos said. "It was chaos."

And it was heartbreaking. PADS set a record last year when the Peru and Ottawa shelters welcomed 371 individuals (including 56 children) the most PADS has assisted during any of its 31 fall-to-spring seasons.

Lots of mouths to feed at the PADS shelter this year? Staff members such as Brenda Salas-Cisco, seen here sorting at the Peru shelter, worry last year's record 371 clients could be broken this season. Inflation and skyrocketing rents have blown up the phones at the shelters. (Scott Anderson - sanderson@shawmedia.com)



(Left to right) Brittany Smith, case manager at the Illinois Valley Public Action to Deliver Shelter, and Marissa Trumper, program director at PADS, wipe down toys with sanitary wipes in preparation for the Ottawa shelter's opening Monday, Aug. 15, 2022. (Derek Barichello – dbarichello@shawmedia.com)

PADS began a new season Monday evening and executive director Carol Alcorn is worried the record total might fall by the time the 2022-23 season draws to a close.

"Already the phones have been ringing," Alcorn said, "and we expect another big year."

Last year's figures came as no kind of surprise. Historically, demand for shelter increases about 18 months after the onset of a national crisis, as individuals and families deplete their savings before turning to charity.

The novel coronavirus pandemic followed that pattern to the letter. Infection controls were imposed in early spring 2020 and by fall 2021 the volume of clients seeking emergency shelter began surging.

Now, inflation has been added to the witches' brew. Higher gasoline, food and utility costs all are squeezing those in need and Alcorn is bracing for the possibility the 2022-23 season will be as bad as, and possibly worse than, the 2021-22 season.



Brenda Salas-Cisco prepares food at the Illinois Valley Public Action to Deliver shelter on Monday, Aug. 15, 2022, in Peru. (Scott Anderson - sanderson@shawmedia.com)
Inflation is squeezing PADS, too.

While PADS is in need of cash donations and in-kind donations (visit ivpads.com for a complete list of needs) Alcorn said her biggest need is paper products, such as bathroom tissue and paper towels. Cleaning products also are at a premium because inflation not only has created new clients but is stretching her budget as well.

Vance Walsh is a PADS monitor and he hopes the 2022-23 season won't end in a record, but he thinks the need for shelter will get worse before it gets better. At the end of each season there usually are one or two clients still in need of housing — placement is completed for most clients well before the shelters are locked for summer — but in May there still were a staggering 14 in need of transitional housing.

It's a bad omen for the season just begun, and Walsh is worried pending evictions will fill their beds, even as COVID-19 loosens its stranglehold on the area's struggling individuals.

COVID-19 remains an issue for PADS, which still is testing and following CDC guidelines, but the pandemic at least no longer poses a staffing problem.

Ahead of Christmas 2021, a spike in infections forced some workers to step away and the resulting staff shortages forced PADS to close its Ottawa shelter and place all the clients in the larger Peru shelter. That problem, however, has been resolved.

"We are blessed to be fully staffed at this time," Alcorn said Monday.

Items to be donated may be dropped off at either shelter or the Lily Pads or Lily Pads Too resale shops. Contact PADS at 815-224-3047 or perupads@gmail.com.



These beds won't be empty for long. Illinois Valley Public Action to Deliver Shelter opened its 2022-23 season at 5 p.m. Monday and agency officials worry demand could be even higher than last year's record total. (Scott Anderson - sanderson@shawmedia.com)



Carol Alcorn, executive director at Illinois Valley Public Action to Deliver Shelter and Brenda Salas-Cisco, begin to prepare food at the shelter on Monday, Aug. 15, 2022, in Peru. (Scott Anderson - sanderson@shawmedia.com)

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