

Coming in from the cold

The Durham Rescue Mission provides a hot meal and a soft place to sleep during the storm

By Zach Potter

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When William Spencer left his friend's house at 1 p.m. on Wednesday, Feb. 12 to catch the bus, he expected to be back at the Durham Rescue Mission's Center for Hope in 30 minutes. He had no idea what the light snowfall would soon become. An hour later, when the bus still had not arrived, he decided to make the trek on foot.

"I watched a lot of cars trying to make it up Alston Avenue sliding off the road, sliding when they was making turns," said Spencer, 48. "There were a lot of cars getting stuck, getting stranded on the side of the road."

The snowstorm that hit Durham and many other cities across North Carolina that day was one of the worst the state has seen in years. Roughly six inches of snow fell in just a few hours.

"I don't think anyone was prepared for the suddenness," said Durham Mayor Bill Bell, who was out on the road when the snow started. "It took me three hours to get back to my house, which normally takes 15 minutes."

By 3 p.m., Bell had declared a state of emergency and told all nonessential staff to stay home. Despite traffic jams and strains on emergency personnel, Bell said the city handled the situation pretty well.

The mayor pointed to a variety of community organizations that aided people stranded by the storm, such as Streets at Southpoint mall and Northgate Mall, which both stayed open to allow citizens to weather the storm indoors, and the Durham Rescue Mission, which has a warm shelter policy allowing residents to seek refuge without checking in when temperatures drop below freezing.

While the snow and ice continued to fall into the night, the mission opened its doors to homeless people looking for a hot meal, motorists who were left stranded by the snow and ice, and anyone who needed a place to get out of the cold.

"We had to sleep 36 on the floor," said Ernie Mills, CEO and co-founder of the mission. "We put down mats



Carla Peake goes through the food stores after the storm. Even when the shelves are filled, the food goes quickly. Peake says it takes upward of 50 cans of green beans for a single meal. (Staff photo by Zach Potter)

on the dining room floor, and we had enough blankets and pillows. Nobody went cold."

But feeding 340 people three meals a day takes a toll on the pantry, and the storm brought in a lot of extra mouths.

"It did really deplete our freezer and our pantry," Mills said of the storm. "It really put us in bad shape. We really need a collection of food to replenish."

Carla Peake, 45, is the food service coordinator and has been with the mission since 2006.

"We had to increase food for our meals by 50 to 75 people," Peake said. "If people come in after dinner time, we get them some soup, something warm."

Peake said the mission relies heavily on donations of bread, pastries and fruit from local grocery stores and the snow interrupted delivery.

"Due to the ice, one day we weren't able to put our vehicles on the road at all," she said. "They were delayed for a few days after the storm as well."

Spencer was ecstatic when staff told him they had a bed available for him. He had been on the mats in the dining hall for a few hours since getting back,

and now he had a full belly and a place to sleep.

Outside, the storm raged on. Abandoned cars littered the roadsides. Bell's generator whirred for hours after he lost power. Snow piled up, and ice crusted the streets and sidewalks.

But in the Durham Rescue Mission, residents did not feel the chill—thanks to the warm blankets, the hot food and the generosity of those who provided them.

DURHAM RESCUE MISSION

The mission is a Christian nonprofit homeless shelter at 507 E Knox St in Durham. Serving the area since 1974, it is North Carolina's oldest long-term homeless shelter.

To learn more or make a donation of either time or money go to www.durhamrescuemission.org.