Flood impacts most vulnerable residents

by Maggie McGuire and Alison Harford
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Zack Brown, a volunteer from Salt Lake City, and Levi Jones, the City of Moab’s public works director, handed out free water to residents impacted by the flood. Credit: [Alison Harford/Moab Sun News]

CJ, a local resident who is homeless, watched as floodwaters swept away his belongings on Aug. 20 for the second time this year—he was camped close to Mill Creek and didn’t hear any warnings about a potential flood. According to Liz Donkersloot, the housing program manager
at the Moab Valley Multicultural Center, he isn’t alone: at least two other individuals had their belongings washed away by the flood.

Sara Melnicoff, the founder of the housing and environmental nonprofit Moab Solutions, worked with the Moab City Police Department to ensure no one was caught in the floodwaters, checking common illegal camping spots within city limits. She’s grateful that everyone was safe.

Melnicoff said the community has been supportive: a campground owner offered a donation of tents, sleeping bags, and sleeping pads for those that lost their belongings.

Another resource is the Safe Outdoor Living Shed, located at the Grand County Public Library. It was created by the Grand County Local Homeless Council earlier this year to offer free tents, sleeping bags, and other essential items to people who find themselves without housing.

“I thought this would be a nice little resource that will get used here and there,” said Liz Donkersloot, who contributes to the project through her work at the multicultural center. “But it’s really proving to be something that people need, unfortunately.”

Donkersloot said the majority of people using the resources have been adults who live and work in Moab and were thrown into temporary and unexpected homelessness—they use the SOL shed’s resources because of a crisis.

“Either their landlord sold their house or their rent went up or they lost a job,” Donkersloot said. “About 95% of the individuals we interact with are ‘situationally homeless,’” meaning that they have temporarily lost housing because of a life-altering event.

“These are mostly people who have never been homeless before—people who are active participants in society,” she said. “We have a lot of families and a lot of individuals that you would never expect who are struggling with homelessness.”

In the first six months, 32 vouchers were issued, distributing 21 sleeping bags, 20 tents, 25 fuel canisters, 25 lights, 19 camp stoves, 11 cooler bags, and eight backpacks. Vouchers are issued by other service organizations like the multicultural center.

“The voucher explains where you can legally camp, we talk about fire restrictions and leave no trace principles,” said Donkersloot, particularly important as Melnicoff said that she suspects
the number of people without housing is on the rise.

As for CJ, he said that even after the flood, he’ll be alright—he’s seen worse.