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SPORTS, 1C

# Austin American-Statesman

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 17, 2024 | STATESMAN.COM

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Kelley Jura-Myrick, shelter services program manager at the Sunrise Homeless Navigation Center, gives supplies to camp resident Ann Marler in South Austin on Sunday. Jura-Myrick and others were giving away food, hygiene products and cold weather gear ahead of freezing weather. PHOTOS BY AARON E. MARTINEZ/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

## COLD SHOULDERS

### Past homeless camp sweeps make the freeze even harder



**ATX in Context**  
Bridget Grumet  
Austin American-Statesman  
USA TODAY NETWORK

When you live outside, you pay close attention to the arrival of winter. You prepare for it. You stock up on blankets and coats and extra socks. You gather propane tanks and, if you're lucky, a small generator.

The homeless encampment where Ann Marler lived with about 20 people last fall had amassed all of those things — then lost them, she said, when city crews bulldozed the camp off Bluff Springs Road about two months ago.

"They came at 7 a.m. one morning and told us we had 5 minutes to get our stuff. I lost everything," Marler, 60, told me Sunday afternoon, thinking of the extra clothing and blankets that would have come in handy as this week's arctic blast rolled over Texas.

"We had cold weather stuff ready," she said, shaking her head. "They took it all."

I met Marler at her new campsite off Onion Creek, as an outreach team from the Sunrise Homeless Navigation Center brought her a black knit blanket, a backpack with toiletries and a bag

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Resident Kent Romines wears multiple heavy layers in a camp in South Austin on Sunday. Romines and other homeless Austin residents rely on blankets, clothing, tents, and fires to keep warm in cold weather.

#### How to help

Emergency outreach efforts are coming to an end, but the homeless service providers around Austin can always use volunteers and donations. The Sunrise Homeless Navigation Center can be reached at 512-368-2685 or [sunrisenavigationcenter.org](http://sunrisenavigationcenter.org).

#### More on 1B

Person found dead after fire at homeless camp.

Nonprofit's volunteers deliver hot meals to unhoused people during freeze.

## Texas Dems fight Abbott on border actions

### Urge Biden to federalize Guard, pause asylum

**Hogan Gore**  
Austin American-Statesman  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Texas Democrats chastised Gov. Greg Abbott and criticized Republican border policies Tuesday, calling Operation Lone Star — the governor's \$11 billion border security plan — a "rogue" initiative that endangers migrants in concert with a new state law meant to crack down on illegal border crossings.

U.S. Rep. Joaquin Castro, D-San Antonio, called for the federalization of the Texas National Guard, which Abbott has stationed at the border to deter migrants from crossing into the state from Mexico; and state Rep. Eddie Morales Jr., D-Eagle Pass, said President Joe Biden should enact a moratorium on granting asylum to protect migrants from the dangers they're encountering in attempting to enter the country.

"President Biden needs to consider federalizing the Texas National Guard because they are being used by the governor to interfere with the duties of the federal government when it comes to immigration," Castro said.

During their press call Tuesday, the Democrats called on Biden to further intervene along the Texas-Mexico

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## Feds: Texas interfering with border agents' work

**John C. Moritz**  
Austin American-Statesman  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Not only is Texas blocking federal border agents' access to a public park along the Rio Grande in Eagle Pass, but the state is also preventing the agents from using federal equipment and from conducting "operationally necessary" activities in the area, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security alleges in a letter to Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton.

In the letter, sent over the weekend, Homeland Security general counsel Jonathan Meyer said the state must grant U.S. Customs and Border Protection full access to the city-owned park by close of business Wednesday or risk unspecified sanctions from the Justice Department.

"Texas's actions are clearly unconstitutional and are actively disrupting the federal government's operations," Meyer said in his letter. "We demand that Texas cease and desist its efforts to block Border Patrol's access in and around the Shelby Park area and remove all barriers to access in the Shelby Park area."

The state's seizure of the park last week as part of Gov. Greg Abbott's

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## 'The worst is behind us,' Watson says of the freeze

**Ella McCarthy**  
Austin American-Statesman  
USA TODAY NETWORK

A record number of people used the city of Austin's overnight cold weather shelters since a cold front touched down in the region last weekend, city officials said Tuesday.

The city has opened seven overnight shelters, which have been used by more than 600 people during the cold snap, Mayor Kirk Watson said during a news conference. The city has said the shelters will be open through Wednesday morning.

For only the third time in the city's history, the temperatures were so frigid that the National Weather Service issued a wind chill warning for the area, Watson said.

Temperatures in the city Tuesday morning dropped to 16 degrees, matching Monday's record low, with a wind chill at times below zero, Watson said.

The wind chill warning expired just a few hours before Austin and Travis County leaders gave an update on the arctic cold front, which has brought days of below-freezing temperatures

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Austin Mayor Kirk Watson gives an update on the city's winter weather response during a news conference Tuesday. Severe cold is expected to remain through Wednesday morning, with wind chills in the single digits for much of Central Texas. MIKALA COMPTON/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

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Volume 153 | No. 147  
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# Camp

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of mandarin oranges. They told her about the city shelters, but she decided to brace for the bitter cold with her dogs in her blanket-covered tent.

As I spoke with her and others camping in the wooded pockets of Southeast Austin, I heard a common refrain: Surviving a hard freeze, with overnight temperatures falling into the teens Monday and Tuesday night, is difficult enough. The city's sweeps of homeless camps in recent months — tossing people's belongings, scattering people from their support network — plainly made this dangerous weather harder.

"This is the third year we're once again scrambling to support our neighbors with survival gear, and honestly, we're tired and our resources are low," Sasha Rose, the organizing lead of Austin Mutual Aid, told me. The group relies on donations for everything people might need: tents, blankets, gloves, hats, sleeping bags, tarps, nonperishable food and other camping supplies.

Partnering with Sunrise and other organizations in the Austin Winter Collaborative Effort, Rose estimated they reached at least 1,000 people around this freeze event with cold weather supplies, as well as rides and support to three shelters not run by the city.

"But it's all just a Band-Aid when we know two days after the freeze, everything we've come together to provide will be trashed in a sweep," Rose added. "It's so discouraging to us all."

Indeed, this was the outcome that homeless advocates feared when Austin voters in 2021 reinstated a ban on homeless camping. The Legislature that year outlawed homeless camping statewide, too — as if putting such a prohibition on the books magically resolved homelessness.

In reality, these bans are heartless half-measures in a city that lacks enough shelter space or transitional housing for the roughly 6,600 people experiencing homelessness in Austin. People are banned from camping, but there's nowhere else for them to go.

Those who live outside — a good number of them on waiting lists for housing — could wake up any morning and discover crews are going to scrape away their home and trash their belongings. The city offers housing to some people during these sweeps. But many of the people living out there are still living out there, the difficulties of day-to-day existence made even harder by having to replace what they've lost.

The city of Austin provides 72 hours' notice before cleaning out a camp so residents have time to move their belongings and connect with social services, spokeswoman Jenny LaCoste-Caputo said. But residents can be removed immediately if they resume camping at a site that was previously cleared, she said, especially if there are safety concerns.

LaCoste-Caputo noted that residents can store their belongings at Violet KeepSafe Storage, a free storage facility for those experiencing homelessness. But the storage facility is in downtown Austin, while



Shelter services program manager Kelly Jura-Myrick, mobile ambassador Carmen Abdelhadi, and volunteer Tara McLeod carry jackets and blankets out of the Sunrise Homeless Navigation Center on Sunday. All of the items were being delivered to homeless Austin residents ahead of freezing weather.

AARON E. MARTINEZ/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

the laws banning encampments have pushed many people to out-of-sight camps around the city. Getting from the Onion Creek camps to Violet KeepSafe Storage, for instance, would involve a trip across two or three bus routes, and walking 1 to 1½ miles, for an excursion totaling about an hour and 15 minutes — and that's just one way.

That's quite a trek to store or retrieve some blankets.

LaCoste-Caputo said the city's focus has been getting people out of the cold and into city-run emergency shelters during this freeze event. More than 600 people found warmth and meals at those shelters.

But thousands more took their chances elsewhere. Marler thought she couldn't take both of her dogs — a black Labrador named Lucy and an energetic Chihuahua named Chance — with her to a shelter (in fact, city officials told me there's no limit on the number of pets). Several others told me they worried about leaving their belongings unattended.

And for some, the shelter experience itself can be overwhelming. Having gone to a shelter during the 2021 winter freeze, Kent Romines told me he will never return to one.

"It was hell: a hundred men on cots, side by side," said Romines, 64, who's been homeless for about six years. "People have no manners. They don't know what boundaries are. I got out as fast as I could."

Then his voice softened. "There's a lot of broken people out here, and they're just doing the best they can," Romines said. "Society put a lot of demands on

them that they can't meet."

I followed the Sunrise outreach team up the road. Kelley Jura-Myrick, Sunrise's mobile and shelter services program manager, parked behind the Home Depot at Interstate 35 and Slaughter Lane, then walked into the woods, looking for a small camp that was there a month ago. She found only the tire tracks of earth-moving equipment across the clearing where a few tents used to be.

Jura-Myrick circled the clearing in disbelief. She was worried about one resident in particular, a veteran on a waiting list for housing.

"He's working with a case manager, but he doesn't have a phone," she said. "Now it makes it hard for anyone to find him."

Jura-Myrick asked everyone about the veteran as her team handed out a couple of fleece and mylar emergency blankets, along with food kits carrying peanut butter, applesauce and other nonperishables, to residents at another encampment across the way. Finally someone pointed to a tent along the side of the road.

Jura-Myrick found the veteran. He assured her he's in touch with his case manager.

He'd moved all of 400 feet. But it was just like starting over.

Grumet is the Statesman's Metro columnist. Her column, *ATX in Context*, contains her opinions. Share yours via email at [bgrumet@statesman.com](mailto:bgrumet@statesman.com) or via Twitter at [@bgrumet](https://twitter.com/bgrumet). Find her previous work at [statesman.com/news/columns](https://statesman.com/news/columns).

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