

Grumet: Pain lingers for those who lost limbs in 2021 winter storm



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Chester Stokes is a gentle soul, the kind of person who is concerned you're not wearing gloves, even though he is the one living out in the cold.

He collects black uniform shirts, like the kind a police officer or security guard might wear, from the rack of donated clothing at the [Sunrise Homeless Navigation Center](#) in South Austin. He wears a small golden padlock at the bottom of his tattered navy blue leg brace, above the spot where his left foot used to be.

"It represents what I am," Stokes told me. He believes he's 48. But he has been living on the streets for so long, he's not sure.

Stokes envisions himself as a protector, but he is the one who needs care. Advocates who work with him at Sunrise say he struggles with cognitive and mental health issues.

Stokes has also been in a wheelchair for the past year. He is among about a dozen or so people in Austin who [either lost feet or suffered other debilitating injuries](#) to their extremities due to frostbite in the [winter storm](#) that pummeled Texas exactly one year ago.

For many Texans, the psychological trauma of that frigid blast — of shivering in homes [without electricity](#), of struggling to keep a loved one's [medical equipment running](#), of scraping by for days [without usable tap water](#) or living for weeks [with burst pipes](#) — left a lasting imprint. Just look at how many of us were triggered by the milder cold snap this month, [stocking up](#) on emergency supplies, obsessing over the power grid's output.

As we mark the first anniversary of the 2021 winter storm, though, I wanted to connect with people who still carry the physical scars from that disaster, the unluckiest ones who stayed outside as 6 inches of snow piled up, as temperatures plunged into the single digits, as the city endured a frozen siege for 164 hours straight.

Nonprofits, mutual aid groups and city officials managed to get more than 1,600 people out of the cold. But some residents, like Stokes, stayed at their encampments. Some struggled with cognitive or mental health issues that made it hard for them to recognize the severity of the situation or find the help they needed.



On top of that, an unsparing Austin-Travis County after-action report said lapses in city planning and communication “resulted in a delay and absence of services for persons experiencing homelessness.” A separate city audit detailing Austin’s lack of preparedness for the freeze noted that Travis County saw more storm-related deaths than several larger counties.

Four of the people who died here were homeless.

Over the past few weeks, I have spoken with people at several homeless encampments who survived that storm, bundled up in tents or makeshift structures. Most were rattled by the experience.

A few, like Stokes, were forever changed.

Storm took twice the toll

Stokes is an Austin native. A Facebook profile he hasn't touched in years says he went to Johnston High, the East Austin school that became Eastside Memorial. Stokes told me that he has family in the area but didn't want to discuss why he doesn't live with them.

Stokes spends his days at Sunrise. He goes to church there, jokes with the staff there, feels safe there.

Stokes told me he spent the February 2021 storm outside, sometimes playing in the snow, sometimes huddling by buildings or a bus shelter on Menchaca Road for warmth. He said he had no interest in going to a cold weather shelter: "I don't like certain smells when I get in a crowd."

About a week after the storm, Stokes noticed his left foot was blackened and bleeding. The doctors decided it had to come off.

He lost the frostbitten toes on his right foot, too.

People at the Sunrise homeless center who have known Stokes for years say that physical trauma — losing appendages, relearning mobility — took a toll on his mental health, too.

"He was out there because his mental health was not cared for," Sunrise Pastor Mark Hilbelink told me. "Because of that, he didn't get himself inside. He really went downhill afterwards because of that."

Hilbelink described the actions of a disjointed mind: Going through the food line at Sunrise multiple times a day, then leaving a stack of meals untouched. Asking almost daily for a new Service Point ID card issued by homeless service providers.

"We find them all over our property," Hilbelink said. "He gets one, and he loses it."

Stokes told me that even with physical therapy, it was hard to adapt to using a wheelchair. "You have to learn everything all over again," he said.

At times, especially when it gets cold, he said, he feels a stabbing pain in the foot that is no longer there.

But his injuries are also part of the story he tells himself. He said his leg brace, wrapped above the spot where he lost his foot, is part of his bulletproof vest. His right foot, the one missing toes, is now stronger, Stokes insists.

“It’s a powerful foot now,” he said. “Not human, but mechanical.”

Sometimes they won't go

Stokes embodies some of the challenges that officials face when they activate cold weather shelters for those who are homeless.

“If you tell him, ‘You need to go to (the shelter intake center at) 505 Barton Springs Road today between 6 and 8 p.m.’ — that doesn’t even register with him,” Hilbelink told me.

Yet that’s how Austin’s cold weather shelters tend to work: The city tells people who are homeless to find their way to an address they might not know, using a city bus system they might not be familiar with, often with just a few hours’ notice.

Austin is working to improve that. In the latest cold snap, people could call 311 to get a ride from anywhere to a shelter. First responders gave rides, too. The city also provided multiple shelter locations and other information through text message alerts to about 1,000 people served by homeless agencies, city spokesman Bryce Bencivengo told me.

Not everyone has a phone, though. (Stokes doesn’t.)

And some folks simply don’t want to go.

Ben Lofton, who lives in a homeless encampment off the Interstate 35 service road near Slaughter Lane, told me he spent last year's winter storm huddled in a tent with his girlfriend and a propane heater, activated sparingly to save fuel.

“I didn’t even know they had shelters last time,” Lofton, 30, told me. But he also said he probably wouldn’t have gone to one. “It’s too many people. It’s just a little too much.”

That was a common refrain among camp residents I talked to. Advocates hear it, too.

When The Other Ones Foundation started working with the residents at Camp Esperanza, the state-sanctioned homeless campsite in Southeast Austin, the nonprofit conducted surveys to learn what people needed.

Only 15% said they were interested in a traditional congregate housing shelter.

Asked if they would want individual shelter units, however, “93% said, ‘I would move in tomorrow,’” The Other Ones spokesman Max Moscoe told me.

That is exactly what the nonprofit is building now: 100 tiny-house-like shelters, with climate control and locking doors, should be ready by April. Another 100 will be added by the end of the year, using a mix of Travis County funding, private dollars and in-kind donations of construction work. These shelters are meant to be a temporary stop while people find their way into stable housing.

The residents at Camp Esperanza experienced their own loss in the 2021 winter storm: Justine Belovoskey, 60, died of hypothermia in her snow-covered tent. Medics found her bundled in multiple socks and pants.

“There are some people, like Justine, who are resistant to accessing indoor resources,” Moscoe said. “The reason for that is that a lot of people have trauma from institutions and facilities that have failed them in the past,” such as jails, mental health facilities or foster care.

“It’s not that people don’t want the help,” he said.

It just needs to be the kind of help they want.

Building on trust and a prayer

That individual-unit approach might be doable for longer-term shelters. But congregate shelters remain the most feasible way to quickly provide a safe haven for hundreds of people during a weather event.

Bencivengo told me the city was better prepared to open shelters in this month’s cold snap because officials had all the supplies — food, cots, blankets and so on — already staged at those facilities. That was a notable improvement over last year.

Still, he recognizes that some people don’t want to go to a group shelter, and some people might be reluctant to seek help from a city that is now enforcing a ban on homeless camping.

“Our goal is to build trust,” Bencivengo said.

Getting people out of the cold is not only a matter of preventing hypothermia and avoiding life-changing amputations, as Stokes had. Frostbite injuries are a flag: They identify people whose living conditions are so dire, they are at risk of an early death. One study of people who were homeless in Boston during a six-year period found those with a history of frostbite or hypothermia were eight times more likely to die.



I was riding around with Deputy Constable Drew McAngus on a recent sunny Tuesday when I met Scott Herl. He was sitting on the curb behind a Starbucks on William Cannon Drive. He had taken off his shoes and socks and was rubbing his feet.

Herl said his feet felt as if they were on fire. “That is constant throbbing, consistent pain,” he said.

McAngus, whose full-time assignment is homeless outreach, told me he helped Herl get treated for frostbitten feet after the 2021 winter storm. An emergency room doctor who has seen plenty of frostbite cases in upstate New York told me that some people have intense pain or a loss of sensation for years.

Herl has both. Burning feet. Numb hands. He took his right palm and rubbed it back and forth against the asphalt, the way you would sand a piece of wood. “I don’t feel that,” he said.

Herl told me he has been homeless for 30 years, in seven states and 13 cities. He said he’s had frostbite damage before, including a serious bout in Kansas

City. He used to do construction work. Now his hands and feet can't bear it. He lives on Social Security and donations from strangers.

McAngus made sure Herl had enough socks and blankets, and then said he would call a medic to look at Herl's feet. The deputy constable threw in a small shaving kit after Herl mentioned it was his 59th birthday.

"What else can I do to help you?" McAngus asked.

Herl shrugged: "A good prayer, maybe."

Grumet is the Statesman's Metro columnist. Her column, ATX in Context, contains her opinions. Share yours via email at bgrumet@statesman.com or via Twitter at @bgrumet.