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STAUNTON — The Valley Mission's homeless shelter has been at capacity for weeks, but is preparing itself for some new arrivals in the months to come.

After receiving a national grant, the Staunton Elks Lodge No. 351 will begin building 35 wooden bunk beds to increase the homeless shelter's capacity.

Valley Mission Public Relations Coordinator Wendy Shiflett said the long, slow economic downturn paired with the cold winter has brought more people to the mission's door.

"There's a huge increase in need," said Shiflett of the newcomers, many of whom have lost hours at their jobs and whose families can't help support them. "We're seeing more people coming in who have never been homeless before."

The Staunton Elks Lodge decided to build the bunks when it learned that the shelter has had to turn individuals and families away because of a lack of space. The lodge received \$10,000 in community building grant money from the Elks National Foundation to fund the project.

"This was our first time applying for that grant and we were very tickled to receive it," said Elks project manager G.R. Davis, whose lodge presented a sample bunk bed to the Valley Mission Board on Friday.

The bunks will be built with "heavy duty" yellow poplar donated by Blue Ridge Lumber, Davis said. Most of the grant money will go toward buying mattresses and linens for the beds.

"It's something that should last the mission a long, long time," Davis said.

The mission currently has 49 beds in the men's dormitory. After shuffling a few beds over to the women's dorm and rooms reserved for families, the Elks' bunks will increase the men's dorm capacity to 70. The changes also will provide storage space for the men sleeping there.

"When they go in they're just going to add a warmth to the room," said Shiflett, who explained the current metal beds seem colder than the incoming bunks. "When people come here to stay, it's tough enough. We want to make it as homey as we can during the time that they're here."

The Elks will begin building the bunks this month, and expect to finish them within a few months.