

Fatal crashes near South Salt Lake homeless center spark calls for safety improvements

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After three men were struck and killed trying to cross the street near South Salt Lake's new shelter, city leaders and homeless advocates are calling for immediate pedestrian safety improvements.

The first happened just weeks after the 300-bed men's shelter opened its doors last month, when a driver killed a man on 3300 South who was within 100 feet of the crosswalk at 900 West, police said.

On Christmas Day, a car hit and killed a man in a wheelchair who was attempting to cross near 300 West. And, on Friday, 67-year-old Duane Nebeker (the only one of the men whose name has been publicly released) was killed while walking across six lanes of traffic on 3300 South near 1000 West.

Police believe all of the deceased were homeless and seeking shelter at the new resource center. And each of the crashes happened at night, during low-visibility hours, and "in an area not controlled by a crosswalk or any crossing device," said Gary Keller, a spokesman with the South Salt Lake Police Department. "So that's a big problem."

In the days since the three deaths, South Salt Lake City Councilwoman Corey Thomas said she's been in conversations with officials at the Utah Department of Transportation to reduce the speed limit from 45 mph to 35 in areas near the shelter and to put a crosswalk closer to the shelter, located at 3380 S. 1000 West.

"Any little thing we can do to help the safety of all the individuals," she said.

The need for safety improvements in this area — which is located outside the free fare zone and away from Salt Lake City's hub of homeless services — has long been known to South Salt Lake officials. In a draft permit outlining rules for how the homeless shelter would operate, the city noted that the bus stop near the shelter on the north side of 3300 South had no controlled pedestrian crossing.

And one block east, at the intersection of 3300 South and 900 West, is "the highest incident of auto/pedestrian casualties in South Salt Lake City," the city noted.

"South Salt Lake has known this is a dangerous street from the beginning," said Michelle Flynn, interim executive director of The Road Home, which operates the resource center.

The city's permit called on Shelter the Homeless, which owns the center, to identify and recommend to clients safe routes to the facility from the Utah Transit Authority bus stop and to work with the Utah Department of Transportation to put in a lighted crosswalk at 3300 South and 1000 West "as soon as practicable."

Preston Cochrane, executive director of Shelter the Homeless, said the organization had originally painted a crosswalk on 1000 West but was required to remove it “because it’s not our road and UDOT said they needed to do a street study and traffic study before that could happen.”

UDOT spokesman John Gleason said he wasn’t aware of a timeline for any improvements to the roadway near the resource center but added that the organization will be working closely with South Salt Lake police and other community partners to boost safety.

“We’re going to be doing everything that we can to see what makes the most sense here,” he said, “but we’re also asking people to make sure that they do everything that they can to make sure that they’re safe, and that’s using those established crosswalks and crossing at the appropriate times.”

Flynn and Cochrane said they support efforts to reduce the speed limit in this area and are also in discussions with the Utah Transit Authority to move the location of the bus stop to improve safety.

In the meantime, Flynn said, The Road Home is educating its clients about safe walking routes in partnership with the South Salt Lake Police Department, which Keller said has also increased enforcement of jaywalking rules near the shelter to prevent further tragedies.

A Salt Lake Tribune analysis of police data in Salt Lake City recently found jaywalking enforcement disproportionately affected people experiencing homelessness in the area near The Road Home’s now-closed downtown emergency shelter — tickets that did not correspond to higher incidents of pedestrian crashes.

Jaywalking tickets can carry fines of up to \$750 and those cited risk getting caught in the “revolving door” of the criminal justice system, the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah has argued. Minor offenses sometimes lead to arrest warrants that can serve as barriers to accessing services and housing and to landing jobs — the very things that help people exit homelessness.

But jaywalking can also put both drivers and people experiencing homelessness at risk, which is why Thomas said she hopes increased enforcement in this area, where jaywalking has explicitly been identified as a problem, will help move people into designated crosswalks.

“Some of these individuals are getting hit because they’re jaywalking and it’s not the driver’s fault because they can’t stop quick enough on a very busy road,” she said. “And they shouldn’t have to if we can have designated safe areas for people to cross.”