

Overflow shelters at churches connect Worcester's homeless with services

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Police Officer Angel Rivera of the Crisis Intervention Team leaves a note for a person living in this makeshift structure about temporary shelter available at St. John's Church.

WORCESTER - As cold temperatures and biting winds froze the city Thursday night, a new collaboration among the city, the Queen Street emergency shelter and several churches to provide temporary overflow shelter beds had its first test, taking care of 37 of the city's homeless.

"There's an obvious need for additional demands for beds and this is a great response to it," said Amaryllis Chaves, director of the Greater Worcester Housing Connection in charge of the Triage and Assessment Center at 25 Queen St. "Thanks to this collaboration

and all parties and volunteers, everything went well."

But those interviewed also recognized that the collaboration is not a permanent solution to homelessness.

"The church shelters, as of right now, are really just temporary; they're just for tonight or tomorrow night, but they're not a permanent solution," City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. said Friday.

"We don't want to just create a shelter and that's people's home for five years, 10 years. We want to create a shelter as a place to be safe but also as a place where you can potentially get connected with the services you need."

The emergency shelter on Queen Street, after a recent expansion, has occupancy of 94 people with 58 emergency shelter beds and capacity for 36 mats, Ms. Chaves said. But cold and stormy nights have seen occupancy exceed 100 and even 120 people in previous years at the shelter, which is affiliated with the South Middlesex Opportunity Council.

As a result, representatives of the city's Quality of Life Task Force, including Commissioner of Health and Human Services Dr. Matilde Castiel, the emergency shelter and three churches - the Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester on Holden Street, St. John's Catholic Church on Temple Street, and All Saints Church on Irving Street, an Episcopal church - agreed to collaborate and provide additional beds and services for the homeless on frigid nights when the emergency shelter overflows.

The churches will generally rotate which will be host when - as Rev. Aaron Payson, pastor of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester, said - "the temperature drops below a certain number and the SMOC shelter occupants rise above a certain number."

The first test of that collaboration was Thursday.

Members of the Quality of Life Task Force, a small team composed of representatives from the city's inspections, public works and police departments, visited homeless encampments, emergency rooms and public spaces throughout the city to encourage homeless residents to come out of the cold.

The Rev. John Madden, pastor of St. John's, said 37 individuals stayed overnight at the church. In addition, 20 volunteers came to serve food and provide comfort, warm clothes and blankets, he said.



Richi Gonzales of the Net of Compassion ministry and volunteer Melvin Castanza open boxes of cots and blankets at St. John's Church Temporary Shelter.

"I think, honestly in the past, we've taken a couple of people into the rectory, I think a lot of churches have done that ... but this was a much more planned out, recognized effort," said Rev. Madden. "It went great, actually."

Ms. Chaves said the effort helps shelter workers better serve the homeless population. Most, if not all, of the homeless brought to the shelter have had previous contact with the Quality of Life Task Force, officials said, but not necessarily with workers at SMOC. This newly established contact enables SMOC workers to help the homeless access social services and housing options.

Asked whether the program meant the city's need for emergency shelter was met, Ms. Chaves said the need appeared to be met Thursday night. But she added that the program will continue to assess whether it is meeting the needs of a homeless population that is constantly changing.

"We are doing great in answering the demand we have right now, and we're all open to looking to see what kind of effort works: for the Triage and Assessment Center, for the demands of population, and for partners we have in this collaboration," Ms. Chaves said.

Mr. Augustus agreed that the needs and size of the homeless population - particularly those homeless with mental health or substance abuse disorders - are constantly changing and require a flexible response. He also emphasized that this response must meet the needs not just of the homeless but of the general Worcester population.

"This is analogous to building the plane and flying it at the same time," said Mr. Augustus. "We're trying to expand our current shelter capacity; we're trying to keep people alive in the meantime and provide these emergency shelters. We're trying to engage new partners and new funding to kind of meet the gaps that we have right now ... and a lot of this stuff is tricky because you need to try to engage with neighborhoods and constituencies when you talk about expanding shelter capacities."