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Homeless are cold and at risk: County program gets people off streets during frigid nights

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The recent cold storm sweeping across the nation and resulting in near freezing temperatures throughout San Mateo County can be life threatening to the local homeless population.

Many homeless are exposed to these extreme weather conditions and are at risk for hypothermia and death. In Santa Clara County, four homeless people died within the last week due to cold weather exposure, according to Bay City News Service.

“One of the things we will see increase during winter are cases of pneumonia, potential hypothermia or just general poor health,” said Laura Bent, director of programs and services at Samaritan House.

San Mateo County developed a network of service agencies, shelters and law enforcement to activate an inclement weather program to combat the homeless population’s exposure to extreme weather.

“Historically, we had a cold snap [several years ago] and it was declared a state of emergency throughout the state of California and we opened a shelter at that time. Based on that experience, we felt it would be good to kind of institutionalize a program to have it be quick and effective to get people out of the cold. It went from a crisis reaction to a commitment from the county to ensuring that we could respond quickly to temperature changes,” said Wendy Goldberg, manager of the county’s Center on Homelessness.

Each morning, officials determine if the appropriate criteria is met to activate the inclement weather program and provide overnight emergency shelter to all homeless people in the county. The program is activated if there is a forecast of an overnight low of 38 degrees or lower, or if it’s predicted to be 42 degrees or lower with at least a 50 percent chance of rain, Goldberg said. If these conditions are predicted in a single city, the entire county system is activated, Goldberg said.

The inclement weather program has been activated every night since Dec. 3 and no one is ever turned away, said Brian Greenberg, vice president of programs at InnVision Shelter Network. InnVision’s Maple Street shelter in Redwood City, the Samaritan House’s Safe Harbor shelter in South San Francisco and the Project We Hope’s Warming Shelter in East Palo Alto provide emergency shelter, Goldberg said.

Maple Street has 75 beds available; about one third of those are dedicated to women and another third of those who stay there tend to be veterans, Greenberg said. During activation of the inclement weather program, more cots are set up in the dining and clinical areas of the shelter to account for the influx in need, Greenberg said.

The Safe Harbor shelter has an additional eight cots it adds to its 90-bed shelter during inclement weather activation, Bent said.

If space at the shelters fills past capacity, the county then provides a motel voucher for the night, Goldberg said.

“Look, there’s death in the homeless community, but in these frigid cold nights, it shouldn’t be because of hypothermia,” Greenberg said.

Typically, to be accepted into one of the shelters or receive a voucher, a person has to go through one of the county’s eight service agencies. People can sign up at the Fair Oaks Community Center in Redwood City, El Concillo in East Palo Alto, the Daly City Community Services Center, the Community Services of Northern Peninsula in South San Francisco, the Puente De La Costa Sur in Pescadero, Coastside Hope in Half Moon Bay, the Pacifica Resource Center and the Samaritan House in San Mateo. However, during inclement weather activation, a person can call the shelter directly, Bent said.

“[The service centers are] nicely spread out throughout the county and it makes it easy for people to go there and get served,” Goldberg said.

The large county is bifurcated by mountain ranges and many homeless don't live in densely populated areas, Greenberg said. Resources need to be strategically located because most of them aren't mobile, they don't have cars and few are lucky enough to have bicycles, Greenberg said.

"To serve a vulnerable population in a county that covers this many geographic miles takes a collaborative approach," Greenberg said.

Law enforcement steps in to assist those who are sleeping outside during frigid nights make it to a shelter, Greenberg said. Police may give a ride to a homeless person to a shelter at any point in the night and they'll be able to stay in a motel if a bed isn't open, Greenberg said.

"[During the inclement weather program] people are just there to get out of the weather, get fed and get cleaned up," Greenberg said. "Hopefully, we're going to open their eyes to want to get a bed in a shelter and want to open up and get into a program and secure a job."

For more information about InnVision Shelter Network visit ivsn.org or call (650) 685-5880.

Maple Street Shelter is located at 1580A Maple St., Redwood City. (650) 364-1150.

Safe Harbor Shelter is located at 295 N. Access Road, South San Francisco. (650) 873-4921.

Warming Shelter is located at 1854 Bay Road, East Palo Alto. (650) 330-8000.

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