



Lowell shelter, agencies work to keep homeless from the cold

By Prudence Brighton, Sun Correspondent

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LOWELL -- Anticipating a tough winter, the Lowell Transitional Living Center has begun a dialog with other human service organizations about helping the Merrimack Valley's hardest-to-reach homeless population -- those who are at extreme risk of exposure to the elements.

Even if this coming winter is milder than last winter, the current deadly opiate epidemic will challenge the center's resources, according to Executive Director Josh White.

White spoke at a recent forum held at the Middlesex Street facility that was convened to seek ways that agencies can work together to provide effective responses to the convergence of homelessness with the opiate crisis.

Last winter's harsh conditions drove 609 men and women between the ages of 18 and 78 to seek shelter, meals and services at LTLC during its winter bed program. The numbers included 75 adults in the 18 to 24 age group, many of whom were heroin users.

Recent local and national trends show an increase in the number of women and senior citizens seeking help at shelters, according to White.

The center started this season's winter bed program on Nov. 16, White said as he spoke to police, emergency responders, health and church representatives who attended the forum.

The center operates as a dry shelter for adult men and women. In the winter months, however, the shelter reaches out to those living outside and opens its doors to those with active alcohol and substance abuse problems.

The shelter accommodates those who are actively using separately from other shelter clients. The winter bed program "is not a Band-Aid," White said. It does offer an opportunity for the staff to begin developing relationships with these clients.

"We want to do so much more than keeping someone alive," he said. "We have many programs and services, and it's important that we communicate this to you and others." But more programs, particularly day programs, are needed.

Tom Barrington, who oversees the winter bed program, explained the steps that staff members follow as they begin the intake process for someone who is chronically homeless.

Cheryl Sullivan, who is the shelter's outreach worker, described the effort required to develop a trusting relationship with people who live on the streets, and reminded the group that she frequently provides transportation to treatment facilities, for people on the streets who need immediate attention.

Client Services Director Anne Marie Malavich said individuals can be banned from the shelter when they pose a threat to the safety of other clients and the staff.

"We do not take banning people lightly. They must present a real threat where their very presence can incite things to happen," she said. Often, they are referred to local hospitals and detox centers.

Gina O'Connor, director of continuity of care at Lowell General Hospital, attended the meeting with a group of social workers from hospital, whom she says are all advocates of the winter emergency bed.

"There is a sense of relief knowing that the Winter Bed Program is in effect for our patients, and we will continue to communicate with LTLC about the program throughout the season," O'Connor said.

"It is good to know there is a place for people to go ... the meeting is a testament that everyone in the community is interested in helping LTLC with their mission and supporting the work they do," said Rick Barry, director of operations at Trinity EMS. "The police, hospital, EMS and so many others were all there and it shows that we are all interested in helping the homeless and LTLC."

Malavich and Lowell General Hospital representatives agreed they should hold a follow-up meeting to focus on communication. The hospital needs to know why someone was banned, and the shelter needs to know of any challenges someone arriving from the hospital might have.

Represented at the forum were Eliot Community Human Services, Comfort HomeCare, the Lowell Police Department, Lowell General Hospital, Lowell General Hospital, Trinity EMS, the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health, Bridgewell Pathfinder, Element Care, Living Waters, Lowell Community Health Center, Transfiguration Greek Orthodox Church and Eliot Presbyterian Church.