COVID-19 Best Practice Information: Homeless Sheltering

Background

- This document highlights practices from across the country that can supplement the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Interim Guidance for Homeless Service Providers to Plan and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) . Additional information can be found in the CDC Interim Guidance on Unsheltered Homelessness and Coronavirus Disaster 2019 (COVID-19) for Homeless Service Providers and Local Officials.

- People experiencing homelessness including people living on the streets and people in temporary facilities, are at risk for infection where there is a community spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

- The following is a list of key findings and considerations for jurisdictions and communities regarding ongoing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic operations across the country. These are best practices for consideration and do not constitute and should not be considered as guidance in any way.[1]

Key Considerations

- CDC guidance recommends that governments, as well as homelessness outreach groups and shelter facilities provide information on COVID-19 and adjust policies to ensure staff, client and volunteer safety. Additionally, governments should establish strategies for helping people experiencing homelessness isolate in the event that they are exposed to COVID-19. This may include creating separate shelters or providing individual hotel rooms for people who have been exposed.[2]

- Shelter staff should be familiar with symptoms of COVID-19, which could include fever, cough, or shortness of breath. Facilities should screen individuals prior to arrival for signs of an acute respiratory illness, fever or possible exposure to COVID-19. CDC guidance provides detailed information on facility layout and procedure considerations when providing services to the homeless community during the pandemic.[3]

Lessons Learned Related to COVID-19 Operations and Homeless Sheltering

Considerations for Encampments

- **Potential Best Practice:** Governments should avoid clearing encampments in areas where there is a community spread of COVID-19 unless there are individual housing units available. Clearing encampments

---

[1] This document contains references and links to non-federal resources and organizations. This information is meant solely for informational purposes and is not intended to be an endorsement of any non-federal entity by FEMA, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, or the U.S. government.

[2] 2020 CDC, Interim Guidance for Homeless Service Providers to Plan and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/homeless-shelters/plan-prepare-respond.html-respond.html

[3] 2020 CDC, Interim Guidance for Homeless Service Providers to Plan and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/homeless-shelters/plan-prepare-respond.html

FEMA

can cause people to disperse throughout the community losing existing services, leading to an increased potential for the spread of infectious disease.[4]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Major cities, including Los Angeles and San Francisco, have established hand-washing stations, and delivered portable toilets to encampments.[5]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Outreach teams are providing people experiencing homelessness with hygiene products, water, and food.[6]

- **Potential Best Practice:** While following appropriate social distancing and protective measures, outreach workers should provide on-the-ground education to people experiencing homelessness during COVID-19, how it spreads, and prevention methods. Volunteers can strengthen outreach efforts by remaining up to date on current policies and resources.[7]

  - Additional resources from the Department of Housing and Urban Development can be found here.

Considerations for Homeless Shelters

- **Potential Best Practice:** Homelessness service providers should develop a plan to promote the practice of everyday preventative actions, during COVID-19. This includes prevention supplies, planning for staff and volunteer absences, reporting cases of suspected COVID-19 infection, identifying a separate space to accommodate residents who are symptomatic, identifying clients at high risk for complications and addressing language, cultural and disability barriers to communicating COVID-19 information. In addition, providers should prepare healthcare clinic staff, and plan for higher shelter usage during the outbreak.

  - Additional guidance from the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), can be found here.[8]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Employees should screen residents, volunteers, and visitors in advance and upon arrival for fever or signs of an acute respiratory illness. They should also monitor residents for symptoms upon admission to the facility and implement appropriate infection prevention practices for incoming symptomatic residents.[9]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Shelters should temporarily suspend new admissions, visitors, and transportation to other institutions if COVID-19 infection is suspected or has been confirmed in the facility.[10]

---

[4] 2020 CDC, Interim Guidance for Responding to COVID-19 among People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/homeless-shelters/unsheltered-homelessness.html
[5] 2020 Los Angeles Times, An unexpected side effect of the coronavirus? A new urgency about helping homeless people, https://www.latimes.com/homeless-housing/story/2020-03-15/coronavirus-homeless-infection-prevention-fear-policy
[6] 2020 Mayor of Baltimore City, Mayor Young Releases COVID019 Emergency Response Plan for People Experiencing Homelessness, https://mayor.baltimorecity.gov/news/press-releases/2020-03-25-mayor-young-releases-covid-19-emergency-response-plan-people
[7] 2020 Department of Housing and Urban Development, Infectious Disease Toolkit for Continuums of Care, https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/5985/infectious-disease-toolkit-for-cocs/
[8] 2020 CDC, Interim Guidance for Homeless Service Providers to Plan and Response to COVID-19, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/homeless-shelters/plan-prepare-respond.html
[9] 2020 NYC, Interim COVID-19 Guidance for Homeless Shelters, https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/imm/guidance-for-homeless-shelters-covid19.pdf
[10] 2020 NYC, Interim COVID-19 Guidance for Homeless Shelters, https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/imm/guidance-for-homeless-shelters-covid19.pdf

- **Potential Best Practice:** Shelters should restructure the sleeping layout to ensure beds are appropriately spaced in accordance with social distancing measures, and request that all residents sleep head-to-toe. Additionally, clients with respiratory symptoms should be housed in individual rooms.[11]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Shelters should serve meals in a staggered manner, in take-and-go style, or in outdoor areas to ensure that social distancing is maintained. Typical restaurant style service should be avoided. Meals should be served with the same group of individuals at each meal to reduce the spread of infection.[12]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Jurisdictions can transition alternate sites into shelters including recreational centers, stores, youth center detention facilities, and other temporarily closed facilities.[13]

- **Potential Best Practices:** Some jurisdictions have procured trailers or hotel rooms to help persons experiencing homelessness who test positive for COVID-19 and do not require hospitalization to quarantine and self-isolate during the pandemic.[14]

- **Potential Best Practices:** Staff and outreach workers should employ necessary safety practices, including wearing gloves, masks, and social distancing when interacting with clients.[15]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Jurisdictions should consider distributing emergency funds to cities and counties supporting shelter services and response efforts to the outbreak among homeless residents in communities.[16]

Considerations for Healthcare Facilities

- **Potential Best Practice:** Hospitals and healthcare facilities should work with homeless shelters and public health departments to ensure COVID-19 patients are safely discharged to a designated location if they do not require hospitalization but need housing. It is important not to house COVID-19 positive individuals with those are not sick.[17]

Topics for the "Best Practices" series are generated from crowd sourced suggestions. Have an idea? Let us research it! Organizations and individuals can e-mail best practices or lessons learned to fema-cipsupport@fema.dhs.gov.

---

[11] 2020 CDC, Interim Guidance for Homeless Service Providers to Plan and Response to COVID-19, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/homeless-shelters/plan-prepare-respond.html

[12] 2020 Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, COVID-19 Guidance for Los Angeles County Homeless Services Community, https://www.lahsa.org/news?article=671-covid-19-guidance-for-los-angeles-county-homeless-services-community

[13] 2020 The Orange County Register, Coronavirus response: Thrift store, rec center to shelter homeless from O.C. armories, https://www.ocregister.com/2020/03/23/coronavirus-response-thrift-store-rec-center-to-shelter-homeless-from-o-c-armories/

[14] 2020 Los Angeles Times, An unexpected side effect of the coronavirus? A new urgency about helping homeless people, https://www.latimes.com/homeless-housing/story/2020-03-15/coronavirus-homeless-infection-prevention-fear-policy

[15] 2020 Baltimore Mayor's Office of Homeless Service, Important Updates, https://homeless.baltimorecity.gov/news/covid-19-information

[16] 2020 KQED, Homelessness and Coronavirus: What Bay Area Counties Are Doing – And How You Can Help, https://intranet.fema.net/org/pnp/npd/collab/NPAD/LLMB/EventDisaster%20File%20Library/HHS%20COVID-19/FEMAWebSiteDocuments/KQED,%20Homelessness%20and%20Coronavirus:%20What%20Bay%20Area%20Counties%20Are%20Doing%20–%20And%20How%20You%20Can%20Help

[17] 2020 CDC, Interim Guidance for Responding to COVID-19 among People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/homeless-shelters/unsheltered-homelessness.html;