

# City's homeless are among the most vulnerable to coronavirus, advocates say

Advocates: Testing and isolation places urgently needed



Members of Victory Programs' Mobile Prevention Team Courtesy photo

By **MARIE SZANISZLO** | Boston Herald

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The city's homeless population is highly vulnerable to coronavirus due to underlying health problems and poor access to health care, advocates say. And the homeless know it.

"I don't want to die," said Simone Costa, 63, who sleeps at the Shattuck Homeless Shelter in Boston. "They were on the microphone first thing this morning, talking about washing your hands and using hand sanitizer."

Coronavirus could spread like wildfire through the homeless population because many have compromised immune systems and are not connected to the health care system, advocates say.

Much about the virus also remains unknown, and those who work with the homeless don't have the testing they need, said Richard Baker, director of Boston-based Victory Programs' Mobile Prevention Team.

"Coronavirus is one more thing that's a risk factor for people who are homeless," Baker said.

Organizations that help the homeless also are scrambling to find places where people can be isolated if they show symptoms, which include fever, cough and shortness of breath and which typically appear within two to 14 days after exposure, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"We will have more needs than we can meet," said Dr. Jessie Gaeta, a physician at Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program. "So the city, the state and shelters are working really hard to identify spaces."

So far, BHCHP is screening people at the front door, Gaeta said, and the program and the Pine Street Inn, New England's largest homeless shelter, are using the Barbara McInnis House, a 104-bed medical respite facility in Boston's South End, to house people showing symptoms.

To reduce the chance of transmission, Gaeta said, BHCHP recommends that shelters have multiple times for each meal so that everyone isn't eating at once and divide large spaces so that only a few people are within 6 feet of one another at the same time. Shelters also should have people sleep in the same bed nightly, with their heads next to their neighbors' feet, rather than having everyone sleep in the same direction, she said.

"We are aware of all the recommendations that the CDC has suggested and are looking into options," said Barbara Trevisan, a spokeswoman for the Pine Street Inn, which shelters about 600 people nightly. "But given our size and the numbers of people we work with, this may take some time."

Advocates for the homeless are telling people of the importance of hand washing to kill germs, but because that often isn't an option for the homeless, BHCHP, shelters and outreach programs are making hand sanitizer available to them.

The Boston Public Health Commission has sinks with soap and water, tissues and hand sanitizer at the Southampton Street Shelter, the Engagement Center behind it and the Woods-Mullen Shelter, which are getting weekly deep cleanings, said BPHC spokeswoman Caitlin McLaughlin. The commission also has added portable hand-washing stations at the Engagement Center.

"We are planning for all scenarios involving COVID-19," McLaughlin said, "and working to stop the spread."