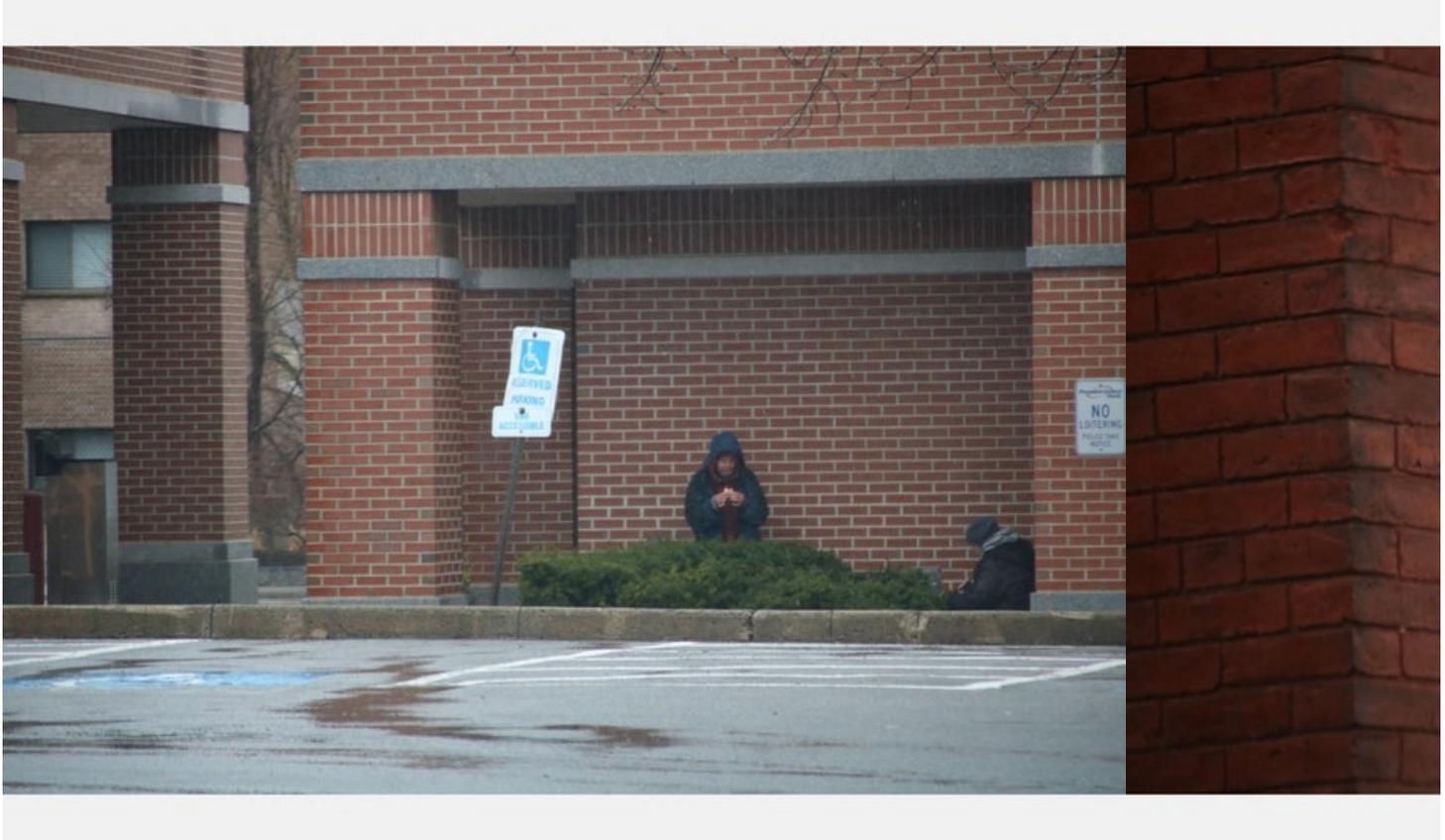


What Do Homeless People In Waltham Do Amid Coronavirus Crisis?

People who are homeless can't self-quarantine. They also don't have easy access to hand-washing or basic sanitation in the afternoon.

By Jenna Fisher, Patch Staff
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Reply



(Jenna Fisher/Patch)

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WALTHAM, MA — As people across the state have been advised to avoid leaving their homes unless absolutely necessary during the new coronavirus pandemic, what does it mean for those who have no home? For the dozens of people experiencing homelessness in Waltham, that's a complicated question.

"We are supposed to be locked down, and we have not been locked down," said Warren Tarks, referring to the governor's stay-at-home advisory.

Tarks uses a cane to get around and is currently staying at the Bristol Lodge's Men's Shelter, one of three emergency shelters operated by the Middlesex Human Services Agency nonprofit in Waltham. The men's shelter houses about 44, and the women's shelter houses 12. Tarks shares a room with seven others until 7:45 a.m., when the shelter closes and those staying are not permitted to return until evening.

"I just walk around all day," Tarks said.

He, like many others in Waltham experiencing homelessness, would previously have gone to the Community Day Center, a day shelter and community center that provides resources, a restaurant for a cup of coffee or the library to sit and read. But these days, that has changed.

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"There's no place for us to sit down and recuperate or get warm. Businesses are closed, and restaurants don't like us," Tarks said. "I understand why."

But some advocates say this is cause for concern, not only for the people who are homeless and are walking around but also for the community.

"It's not nice for them at all," said Chaplain Justi Godoy from Chaplains On the Way, a [Waltham nondenominational interfaith organization](#) that offers services for those experiencing homelessness here. "But it's also a horrible thing for the city to have this group doing that, riding buses, spending money they don't have when they ordinarily wouldn't, just to stay warm, walking around, and huddling in the cold. People are bound in a way I don't normally see."

Others say that many within that population — which often struggles with mental illness, post-traumatic stress disorder and other health issues — unintentionally may not be fully following social distancing protocols, putting themselves and others at risk for spreading COVID-19.

People who are homeless can't easily self-quarantine. They don't have easy access to hand-washing or basic sanitation when they are outside.

"It's like, how can you distance yourself? How do you do this all when there's nowhere to go to do it?" another man also staying at the Bristol Lodge told Patch.

And then there's the weather.

On Friday, temperatures dipped below 40. It was windy and raining. Around 8 a.m., several people stood outside of a fast-food restaurant on Main Street drinking coffee and trying to stay dry.

"Now, if we're not worried about coronavirus, we're worried about getting sick with something else," he said.

And a common sound at the shelter recently during the night? Coughing.

When guests come back to the shelter for the night, before they sign in, the shelter asks that they wash their hands, and they have to fill out a form that asks them if they're experiencing any symptoms or if they've come into contact with anyone who has. But what happens if the person you came in contact with was asymptomatic?

And some who stay at the shelter say they're unclear what would happen if someone wrote that they didn't feel well or thought they may have come in contact with the virus. Many fear simply losing their bed.

Precautions

"They have us come in and wash hands before we sign in," Tarks said. "But staying 6 feet apart from each other is impossible. There's 45 of us, and it's very hard for us to spread out."

A spokesperson for the Middlesex Human Services Agency, which runs the shelter, told Patch there were ongoing deep cleaning services for all programs (it also offers a food pantry and provides daily hot meals), it offers prescription assistance and transportation, and has staff coverage for those who need to be quarantined.

"We are taking extra precautions with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and the Greater Boston Food Bank (GBFB) to sterilize our facilities and educate our clients on best practices in self-care and social distancing," reads a statement sent to Patch.

The agency was not immediately available to comment on what happens when a member of the community tests positive for the virus.

Does Tarks feel safe?

"Not really, and it has nothing to do with the other men that are here," Tarks said.

Still, he's quick to count his blessings.

"The best thing about it is I have a bed, a place to lay my head, take a shower and try to do what I normally do and try to get myself straightend out," he told Patch.

What Happens, If...

What happens when someone starts to feel a little under the weather?

If these people had a place to go, officials would tell them to go home and self-quarantine for 14 days — and if they get any symptoms, to call their primary care provider.

That's not an option for this community.

Carolyn Montalto, executive director of the Community Day Center of Waltham, a nonprofit that provides resources — from food to help connecting to social workers to a place to rest for the afternoon — said it had to adapt operations because of the pandemic. The space was too small to keep open, so case managers now call to check in on folks. They bag up and bring food outside daily, serving between 25 and 50 people.

One of her first thoughts when the public library closed down was "there's not going to be any bathrooms," she said. She reached out to the mayor, who quickly helped secure two port-a-potties to set up near the center.

Then, three weeks ago, Montalto's fears turned to what would happen should someone show up looking for help, showing symptoms of the virus.

"Our agency is really about resources. It's about finding and connecting people to the right resources," Montalto said.

"Three weeks ago, we had no resources to this major crisis."

She called hospitals and urgent care facilities, but no one seemed to have a plan.

Then last week, a member of the homeless community started to show symptoms consistent with the virus. She said the person was tested on the way to the hospital, and later it turned out that person tested positive. At least two others in the community that she's heard of have also been tested — for one, the results came back negative, but the other also turned out to have the virus and was transferred to another hospital for quarantine.

Montalto said it's not perfect, but it's something.

Her organization is doing its best to stay up and running and help those who need it most, she said. And she now knows she'd likely call for an ambulance if someone comes to her showing symptoms.

What are communities doing?

Joe Finn, president of the Massachusetts Housing Shelter Alliance, said some communities are doing better than others.

"It's a tough situation right now without a doubt," he told Patch. "We're trying to get the state to understand that many shelters lack the spacial requirements to create the social distancing that's being recommended by the state for the rest of us."

And the danger of that is that by not having a place for people who are homeless to quarantine or practice social distancing, should a spike in the number of cases hit the community, it could put added pressure on already-taxed health facilities and front-line health care workers.

"This is not a 'homeless issue' right now," Finn said. "Regardless of what your opinions are around homelessness, this is a public health issue."

In Boston on Friday, there were 29 people who were homeless who had tested positive for the virus, said Vicki Ritterband of [Boston Health Care For The Homeless Program](#). That number jumped to 200 on Monday, Boston Mayor Marty Walsh said Tuesday, highlighting how quickly the virus can spread in a community.

BHCHP has set up tents in Boston to help facilitate a safe place to isolate and quarantine for the homeless population as they are tested, she said. That's in addition to 500 beds reserved for the homeless at a space in the Seaport, 70 beds in Allston and another couple hundred beds at the state owned Newton Pavilion that was once part of the Boston Medical Center.

In Cambridge, the city has turned a school's field house into a day shelter.

What's Next for Waltham?

Godoy from Chaplins On The Way points to Boston and Cambridge's efforts.

"Keeping the shelters open and keeping people in would help," he said. "That's what other cities are doing."

The shelter should be able to keep people in all day, he said, and if they need extra support of funding, the city or state should help them.

Godoy said he and others have called the day shelter to volunteer to help staff it if that's the issue. But they haven't heard back.

"I find this really problematic," Godoy said. "There should be some plan for quarantine or isolation for the population, which the city has not done."

Tarks and others who stay at the shelter say they appreciate recent efforts at the shelter to deep clean, but they'd feel more comfortable if they had more information from administration on what a plan was and if everyone there, from staff to those staying there, got tested for the coronavirus, as has recently happened at shelters in Boston.

Finn, Godoy and Montalto all say many are feeling anxious about the current pandemic — but that adding homelessness, food insecurity and concern about just getting sick when the weather turns bad takes it to another level.

"It sucks," said one man who is staying at the shelter. He stressed that he's just not sure what to do. "I just wish everyone who has some form of political power will stress more emphasis on the homeless community during this crisis."

Tarks agreed.

"Treat us like the way you want to be treated," he said.

Mayor Jeannette McCarthy told Patch the city is working on a plan but did not elaborate.

How many people are experiencing homelessness in Waltham?

During the most recent "point in time" tally of the number of people in Waltham who were sleeping outside earlier this winter, around 25 people were counted. That number doesn't include how many may have been staying at shelters or "couch surfing" or in the hospital. If shelters were full, that would put the number of those who are without a permanent place to stay in Waltham at around 80.

