

The Winter Plan 2011-2012 Hearing – 10/20/11
Committee on Human Services
Testimony of Amanda Formica, Executive Board Member, Coalition of Housing and Homeless
Organizations (COHHO)

On behalf of the Coalition of Housing and Homeless Organizations (COHHO), thank you to Chairman Graham and the members of the Committee for the opportunity to submit comments regarding the Winter Plan.

COHHO is made up of more than fifty organizations and homeless advocates from ~~across~~ ~~round~~ DC working to end homelessness and support the development of more affordable housing. We recognize and appreciate all of the work that the City and the Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH) do in preparation for hypothermia season each year. We want to thank the City for its continued dedication to ensuring that shelter is available to everyone in need during the worst weather conditions.

COHHO would like to encourage the Department of Human Services and ICH to revisit its efforts to find more accessible hypothermia shelter locations, especially in Northwest, and reach out to social service agencies in that part of the city to identify options. Individuals living on the street and accessing day programs in Northwest DC appreciate your awareness of their needs and considering further refining to the process of finding shelter locations that better reflect the needs of homeless constituents.

COHHO would like for the Committee to encourage the relevant City agencies to consider calling hypothermia alerts earlier than 9 am each day. On ~~non-Alert~~ ~~regular~~ days, shelters must be emptied by 7:030am, forcing people out into potentially dangerous weather. Without phones or computers to find out about an alert, people are sometimes outside for long periods of time before they are aware of an alert being called, when they could have stayed inside if the alert ~~were~~ called earlier. An earlier announcement would also provide more time for social service agencies to spread the information out around the community and get help for their clients who are stranded. An ideal system would be similar to the one used to decide if schools are closed on a given day. Earlier alert calls will ultimately save lives and provide greater safety and security for individuals who are homeless.

Another way to provide better safety and effectiveness of the hypothermia alert system would be to make the information easily accessible to the public via the internet, in addition to the phone. A website listed alongside the hypothermia hotline on all advertising would provide another avenue for ensuring that information about alerts is disseminated to as many people as possible immediately upon release.

Similarly, COHHO would like to encourage the Committee to ensure that information about how the shelter van system operates, its drop-off and pick-up locations, schedule, and rules are ~~publically~~ publicly posted online, on paper, and placed in popular locations and social service agencies around the city. Increased information will make the system more user-friendly and allow for a smoother flow of people to and from shelters.

Lastly, COHHO would like the City to reexamine the safety conditions in shelters to ensure adequate living conditions for individuals accessing services. Hypothermia season can be particularly stressful for people who are homeless, which combined with more crowded facilities creates an increased need for safety assessment.

Thank you very much for your consideration. Please contact us if there is any assistance that COHHO and our member organizations can provide as you work to implement this year's Winter Plan.

Sincerely,

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