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**Subject:** Regarding issues about temperatures and capacity related to opening severe weather shelters that were discussed at the January 2, Communications Subcommittee meeting  
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Dear Homeless Strategies Workgroup:

I recently listened to the January 2, 2020 Homeless Strategies Workgroup (HSW) Communications Subcommittee meeting and wanted to offer a few observations. Present at that meeting were Whatcom County Council Member Barry Buchanan, Melissa Morin and Ann Beck from the Whatcom County Health Department, Riley Sweeney from the City of Ferndale, and Jennifer Daly from Northwest Youth Services. [Click this link to access the audio of that meeting.](#)

Since the National Weather Service is forecasting some significantly cold temperatures for Whatcom County starting at the end of this week, once again it feels important to take an earnest look at the resources that have been coordinated with all of your hard work this far, and at how accessible those resources will be for community members without shelter under winter weather conditions. Below is the National Weather Service forecast as of the time that I am writing to you here. <https://forecast.weather.gov/MapClick.php?zoneid=WAZ503>

**Saturday** Windy. Rain likely. Highs in the lower to mid 40s.

**Saturday Night** Breezy. Mostly cloudy with a chance of rain and snow in the evening, then rain and snow likely after midnight. Snow level near 1000 feet. Lows in the lower 30s.

**Sunday** Windy. Rain and snow likely in the morning, then mostly cloudy with a chance of rain and snow in the afternoon. Snow level near 1000 feet. Highs in the mid to upper 30s.

**Sunday Night** Windy. Mostly cloudy. A chance of rain and snow in the evening, then a chance of snow after midnight. Snow level near 200 feet. Lows 16 to 20.

**Monday** Windy. Mostly cloudy with a slight chance of snow. Highs in the mid 20s.

**Monday Night** Windy. Mostly cloudy. Lows 13 to 17.

**Tuesday** Windy. Partly sunny. Highs in the lower 20s.

**Tuesday Night** Windy. Partly cloudy. A slight chance of snow after midnight. Lows 13 to 17.

**Wednesday** Windy. Mostly cloudy with a chance of snow. Highs in the mid to upper 20s.

During the January 2, HSW Communications Subcommittee meeting, near the end of the meeting there was a discussion revolving around the temperature figure, 28 degrees, which is included in the Severe Weather Shelters Guiding Assumptions, which outlines conditions under which severe weather shelters will be opened (<http://www.whatcomcounty.us/DocumentCenter/View/43016/Severe-Weather-Shelter-Guiding-Assumptions?bidId=>,) and about the qualification in the statement that "Severe Weather shelters will open when there is no capacity at the Lighthouse Mission and overflow Winter Shelters," which leads off those guiding assumptions. It is my understanding the call to open severe weather shelters is made by the director of the Whatcom County Health Department, Regina Delahunt.

It is also my understanding from what was said and the January 2 meeting, that there has been that there have been requests from community members, of which the Whatcom County Health Department is aware, for a higher temperature threshold to initiate opening severe weather shelters, as well as requests for more sheltering options, specifically non-faith-based options. However, from how Ann Beck described things at the meeting, it seems that ultimately the assumption about capacity dictating whether other options are offered is effectively precluding any temperature forecast from having much of an influence on opening severe weather shelters, at this point.

To me, this continues to illustrate the perils created by capacity being used as a major deciding element on whether there are any specific winter/severe weather shelter options at all made available to unsheltered members of our community other than 1. the Lighthouse Mission, 2. one secular women's shelter that is effectively an overflow for women who would normally stay at the Lighthouse Mission, which is not a secular shelter, and 3. the Northwest Youth Services Youth Winter Shelter.

During that January 2 discussion, Ms. Beck was indicating that the 28 degree temperature was decided on based on what resources were available. And yet, according to the City of Bellingham Website, <https://www.cob.org/services/housing/homeless/Pages/2019-winter-actions.aspx> the County has four severe weather shelter options that can collectively house up to around 185 people (the County website does not list Seventh Day Adventist as a resource yet for some reason). And yet none of these shelters have been made available during the windy, cold, rainy weather we have had so far this winter, except for the extreme weather during Thanksgiving week, simply because there had been capacity available at the Lighthouse Mission or its overflow facility. And what's more, at the meeting people were seeming to speculate that none of these resources might even be used for the rest of the season, again both because temperatures might not get to 28 degrees, but primarily because of this issue of capacity still being available at the

Lighthouse Mission and its overflow facility.

**Questions, which I hope that possibly Ms. Beck, or someone involved in the creation of the Severe Weather Shelters Guiding Assumptions, could answer for me:** 1. Did the shelter provider partners - Fountain Community Church, Christ the King, Seventh Day Adventist, and Garden Street United Methodist - request that they not be called upon to offer resources unless there was no capacity available at the Lighthouse Mission? and 2. Had any members of the Homeless Strategies Workgroup, or the Health Department sought to achieve severe weather shelter availability from any of these partners in the interest of providing a greater variety of options (such as those for families, those with special health needs, couples who wish to not be separated, etc.) to the Lighthouse Mission even if the Mission were not to be at capacity?

Obviously, it would be more ideal if we had secular shelter providers and it is disappointing that our City and County Governments did not step up in an absence of private providers to provide this themselves. However, I also appreciate that considerable effort was directed in securing other options that to all appearances would offer some greater amount of choice and conditions to one large-sized, mission-driven, low-barrier shelter, with their own specific rules and staff members. I appreciate the offerings of the Lighthouse Mission but it is not for everyone and even people who are comfortable in a religious shelter, may not be able to stay in one that is large and often noisy or that divides couples, or otherwise does not address their specific needs.

But in my view, these resources that have been admirably assembled - they are more like trophies at this point. No one has had access to use them except for that one time during Thanksgiving when people pretty much had a day by day notice as to whether they would be available or not. Four shelter locations, 185 beds, no access. It remains to be seen if they will be taken off the shelf and activated if low temperatures do drop below the 20s later this week.

The thing is, even though people have seemed, as Ms. Beck described, to be understanding of the choice of 28 degrees once it is explained that a number had to be picked to help the County take action, and even though the community conversation about what is available this winter is not so angry, as Mr. Sweeney described, as the conversations about shelter availability a year or so ago, in reality we have not actually opened up, except for youth and except for Thanksgiving week, any more viable access to shelter resources in addition to the Lighthouse Mission and its overflow facility than we did last year! Therefore, I don't think we should be being accepting and I think we all still need to be upset that this is the case. At least, last year for part of the month of February the Whatcom County Council opened up secular shelter for men for a reliably expectable period of time. Outreach people knew it was there, had a good idea for

how long, and were able to have enough time to spread word so that people would actually take advantage of it.

And regarding outreach people, I'd like to suggest that those who are decision-makers regarding winter shelter availability would benefit from doing ride-alongs with community members who are doing nighttime homeless outreach. They could see for themselves the obstacles people are encountering to checking into an actual shelter that is available, or what makes existing shelters prove to be unviable options for many who would benefit from sleeping indoors in freezing conditions. Decision-makers might be able to offer some suggestions that would be helpful to outreach people, but also there would be a lot of valuable things they could learn from what they witness.

With the recent wind, rain, and construction on city streets this winter, one thing of which I am aware that winter outreach volunteers are asking, is that the city plan for and provide advance notice regarding one or more secular and safe locations where people without shelter can get transportation to severe weather or winter shelters. This has been explained as being necessary due to the fact that those without shelter do not feel safe walking uphill to the drop-in center under these conditions, especially those who are elderly or disabled. There are probably dozens of these kinds of recommendations of which decision-makers could be made aware if they are in close communication with those doing outreach.

What we have to remember is that it doesn't really do us much good to be thinking we can maybe get away without opening any severe weather shelters for the winter, when in the winter here, the weather is actually too cold and wet for people to safely be out in without nighttime shelter, and people will potentially be getting sick, potentially be spreading illness, potentially be getting injured and be taking actions that are potentially dangerous to themselves or others due to the effects of that inhospitable weather. All of this is costly in more ways than one. I feel that wondering if we might not have to provide solutions to this is creating more problems for us. People shouldn't be kept from being sheltered at all, especially not in the winter.

Organizations have stepped up to provide shelter during the winter. There has been no reasonable sounding explanation that I have heard as to why we are not allowing people to access that shelter.

Finally, here's a transcript I made of the portion of the January 2, 2020 Homeless Strategies Workgroup (HSW) Communications Subcommittee meeting that I was referencing in this email to you. I was transcribing from audio, but I did my best to correctly identify the speakers:

29:33

*Jennifer Daly: Ann, how do you feel like - I just feel like it's been - I*

*haven't been involved in this group very much - but the communication around the shelters has been going? Better?*

*Ann Beck: Yes, I do think it's going better. I think - it's interesting because I'll think we've gotten word out, and then I'll here from somebody over here that says I'm not seeing this here. And then I contact that person and they say no, we've got it posted in these three spots. But I'm like, but somebody told me that like, but these are there - So what I'm learning is that we're not going to meeting everybody's needs. And I go back to this person and like, well, yeah, well I know it's there but I think it should be here. No, no I can't do it all!*

*But I definitely think the shelters themselves are really good about daily communication of the numbers. So I've been tracking that on a spreadsheet. Tomorrow, during the workgroup, I'm going to bring this little graphic which just has the past two months of shelter, and then, as well as the temperature to show whether or not temperature is affecting things - which is not really.*

*Riley Sweeney: But it also hasn't snowed yet.*

*Ann Beck: No, but during the really, really cold time at Thanksgiving when we had to open the severe weather shelters, it was when the numbers were much lower - the temperatures didn't quite align. So, at any rate, I think that communication is better. I think there's always room for improvement. I mean, and then I think we've done a good job with the County and City trying to make sure our messaging and websites have lined up, but yeah.*

*Riley Sweeney: Good response from the editorial, so that was nice. Both your guys' and yours, so -*

*Council Member Buchanan: Are you hearing, Ann, any - much feedback on the 28 degrees, still?*

*Ann Beck: I mean, I think everyone always has an opinion about that. I think it's - whenever I do the trainings for volunteers or other things, people don't really care for 28 degrees. They think it should be - you know, that's really cold and they think it should be, you know, 32 or whatever, you know there's - but we have the resources we have. So, and that's what we say, that nobody really likes this number because it's incredibly hard to pick a number that says this is when - so that's just the messaging that we say. There were a lot of people working really hard for several meetings to talk about this. We looked at a lot of data, a lot of research, and this is what we came to. It's not a number anyone's really in love with but we needed something, so that it's not a - just a here and there, not sure when to go. We needed something definitive. And that seems - people pretty much seem to get that.*

*Council Member Buchanan: Is that something - do you feel we have the capacity or ability to validate this year somehow, that we can -*

*Ann Beck: What do you mean?*

*Council Member Buchanan: That we could say that - the difference between 32 and 28 may not blow our capacity off the roof, you know as far as people - or our providers. I don't know what I'm trying to say. I'm trying to say is there a way that we can evaluate whether that number is - can be moved?*

*Ann Beck: Yeah, I do think though, it's not so much about temperature, it's about the capacity of the other shelters. The number one thing I hear from other folks is the desire to have other options for shelter, is what it comes down to, to have, you know, non-faith-based options for shelter. So I think even if we change the number, it still -*

*Jennifer Daly: And this year it might not matter, you know, we haven't really gotten that cold.*

*Ann Beck: No, but February last year was the colder point.*

*Jennifer Daly: I just wonder - but we could go all the way through the season and not hit 28 degrees again.*

*Ann Beck: Right*

*Council Member Buchanan: True.*

*Jennifer Daly: And, or we could also not hit 33 degrees again.*

*Ann Beck: Even if we move the number up to 33, 34 and there was still room at the other shelters, we're not opening up the shelter.*

*Woman: Oh.*

*Ann Beck: So it has to do more with the capacity.*

*Woman: Oh, and we haven't hit that.*

*Ann Beck: No, we've come close a couple times, but the temperature wasn't low enough. I mean it's the two things hand in hand, so.*

*Council Member Buchanan: How - has that been, have we had comments regarding just that, that the capacity issue and that people are saying well, even though it's not 28 -*

*Ann Beck: Yeah, people think the capacity shouldn't necessarily be taken into account, that there should -*

*Council Member Buchanan: Because of the faith-based vs. secular issue?*

*Ann Beck: Yeah, or there should just be more options available to people if it gets really cold. Yeah. But definitely the number one thing is the faith-based, um [correcting herself], non-faith-based option.*

*Riley Sweeney: To put it into perspective, it was a much angrier conversation in 2018 than what we're having today.*

Sincerely,  
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