

Whatcom County Homeless Winter Shelter FAQs

February 12, 2021

Whatcom County Health Department, Human Services

Introduction

Numerous questions and a good amount of misinformation is circulating in the community about shelter capacity and shelter safety. The Whatcom County Health Department and the City of Bellingham work very closely to ensure that there is enough shelter space for everyone who needs it.

Q: What is the Health Department's role in opening winter shelters?

A: In 2019, Health Department staff worked with a task force to establish guiding assumptions for severe weather shelters, to be opened when needed. There's a difference between severe weather shelter, winter shelter, and year-round shelter. The Health Department focuses on severe weather sheltering as a response to public health concerns for those living unsheltered. The Health Department doesn't open or operate winter shelters. Winter shelters are opened during the entire winter season to add capacity. Severe weather shelters are opened when temperatures drop to 28 degrees or less and when there is not capacity within the year-round and winter shelters.

Q: Where are the severe weather shelters this year?

A: We rely on severe weather shelter partners to operate this extra level of sheltering. Last winter, there were several churches willing to open their doors, and they were called to action about 10 nights during the winter season. This year, because of the pandemic and safety concerns for many of the congregations in the churches, we were not able to find partners willing to open their doors. There is, however, still capacity in the rest of the shelter system.

Q: So there is no severe weather shelter this year?

A: We do not have that extra layer of shelters this year. However, we anticipated this challenge and worked to build added capacity for all of the winter season. There are more beds available in winter shelters this year than there were last year.

Q: How many shelter beds are available?

A: The diagram below shows the total change in beds available from last year to this year. *One of the projects we focused on this year was helping to move folks into Base Camp, a shelter operated by Lighthouse Mission.*

Shelter Bed Capacity in Whatcom County

2019-2020 Winter Season



Actions taken to increase capacity

- Base Camp- 50 more beds added
- Year round funding dedicated to YWCA and Lydia Place
- City and County winter motel funds increased

2020-2021 Winter Season



A total of 522 beds are available through several organizations including Base Camp, the Drop-In Center on Holly Street (available through a partnership between Lighthouse Mission and Christ the King Church), Opportunity Council, Lydia Place, the YWCA, the City of Bellingham, and the Whatcom County Health Department.

Q: Is that enough beds?

A: Last year when we opened severe weather shelters on top of the operational winter shelters, the highest number of beds used on any one night was 212. We also fund motel stays and other shelter services for specialized populations.

Q: I am hearing that the Lighthouse Mission requires people to be sober to sleep there.

A: This is not accurate. At Base Camp, they do not test folks for drugs or alcohol use. Folks are asked not to use substances on site, or to bring drugs or alcohol into the facility, but as long as their behavior is respectful and safe for other folks staying in this congregate setting, there is no requirement for sobriety on site.

Q: I heard that folks who have been kicked out of Base Camp are not welcome there.

A: Base Camp staff works with those who have had previous restrictions for admission to access services again. If people are able to safely be a part of that community again and correct behaviors that endangered other guests, they are welcome back.

Q: Do people have to attend chapel services or pray while they are staying there?

A: No, many years ago under different leadership, there were some requirements like this. There is now no forced religious activity or expectations for guests. There are some prayer circles, self-help groups and other meeting opportunities for those who want to attend, but there is no requirement.

Q: Why aren't outreach workers meeting with campers?

A: Many of the folks at the camp are already connected with services in our community. Outreach workers have tried to connect with their clients and other campers and have been at times turned away by advocates at the camp. Sadly, outreach workers have been accosted and assaulted at Camp 210, creating very unsafe conditions. Sadly as well, some of our program partners have even reported seeing their clients become even more vulnerable since moving from Base Camp to the tent encampment as they are now actively using drugs, not taking their medications, and no longer working with their case managers on their goals or making their appointments.

Q: For those who won't go to Base Camp, why are no other options being created?

A: Other options have been created and offered, but are limited. We welcome other partners to the community who are interested in operating shelters that provide more options to folks. Governments are not able to offer all that is being asked. Base Camp has been a great partner as they continually figure out how to address the challenges around offering a large congregate shelter.

Q: What are the real numbers? Is Base Camp full?

A: On November 13, which is the week that Camp 210 at City Hall started to form, there were 196 guests who stayed at Base Camp. This week, on February 7, there were 151 folks who stayed. Base Camp's population dropped by about 80-90 folks within the first month of Camp 210 opening. Slowly over the past month, it has climbed back up to about 150 a night. There is still room for another 50 there and 39 additional in the overflow shelter. For the health and well-being of the vulnerable people at encampments, we sincerely hope they will return to Base Camp where they were healthier, properly supported, and safe.