

Coalition of Housing and Homeless Organizations (COHHO)

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2013-2014 Hypothermia Report

To: Hon. Allen Y. Lew, City Administrator, District of Columbia
Hon. BB Otero, Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services
Hon. David Berns, Director, Department of Human Services
Michele Salters-Williams, Administrator, FSA, DHS
A. Dallas Williams, Deputy Administrator, FSA, Homeless Services, DHS
Chapman Todd, Chair, Operations & Logistics Committee,
DC Interagency Council on Homelessness
Hon. Jim Graham, Chair, Committee on Human Services,
Council of the District of Columbia

Introduction to this Report

This report is submitted on behalf of the Coalition of Housing and Homeless Organizations (COHHO). COHHO is a diverse group of non-profit organizations and individuals in the District of Columbia who have a common goal of ending homelessness.

COHHO has been at the forefront of gathering data and monitoring information about cold and heat alerts during hypothermia and hyperthermia seasons.¹ Exposure to extreme cold or extreme heat can result in death, and for homeless persons the risk of exposure to such extreme temperatures is a daily reality. For this reason, COHHO and its members have developed a system for tracking the daily weather conditions, alert status, nightly census in the homeless shelters, and identities of those shelters that were over capacity on a given night, and by how many beds.

The information for the 2013-2014 Hypothermia Season (November 1, 2013 – March 31, 2014) can be found in the attached Hypothermia Chart (spreadsheet). There were 151 days between November 1, 2013 and March 31, 2014, inclusive.² In addition, two Alerts were called in April 2014, and data for those dates have been added to the Chart.

Several sets of data are incorporated into this Chart.

¹ COHHO or its member organizations have reported on Hypothermia for more than eight years. COHHO's reports are intended to amplify, not replace, reports prepared by or for The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness.

² The chart begins on October 31, 2013, solely as a reference point.

Weather: The weather data is taken from the National Weather Service's Official Weather Data for Washington, DC. It is the actual data recorded each day. The Homeless Services Reform Act of 2005 requires that a Hypothermia Alert be issued when the actual or forecasted temperature or wind chill will be 32° Fahrenheit or below. Thus, we measure when an alert should have been called based on actual readings. It is possible that more alerts should have been called based on forecasts.

Alert status: Once an Alert is called during the Hypothermia Season, it is required that the hypothermia shelters open and United Planning Organization (UPO) vans pick up homeless persons from the streets and take them to shelters according to a written protocol incorporated into the Winter Plan.³ The Chart indicates those nights on which an Alert was in effect, the hypothermia shelters were supposed to be open, and other emergency shelters may have been open as overflow.

Census/capacity data: The Chart tracks daily census data for the emergency shelters and other emergency placements by categories: men, women, family groups, number of persons in families, and total numbers of persons in the City-contracted system on any given night. For families, the Chart tracks nightly usage of motels/hotels, DC General hospital site, recreation centers, and other community-based sites.

The Chart does not include the persons served in warming buses and other facilities on Cold Emergencies. Those persons were in addition to the persons counted in the Capacity figures of those served in the shelters and overflow facilities. Information about the numbers of persons served in Cold Emergency facilities is provided on pages 3 and 4 below.

Deaths

The Community Partnership states that they received four calls from the Office of the Medical Examiner concerning deaths. Two of the decedents had been living in a shelter. Two other persons were found deceased out of doors; one was inappropriately dressed and possibly homeless, and one was believed to have been homeless. In addition, homeless persons have stated that there was an additional death of a person found in Franklin Square Park on Sunday, March 9, 2014. Two additional deaths were reported on The Washington Post website on April 16, 2014, of two men found near I-295 at Pennsylvania Avenue, SE.⁴ The

³ The Winter Plan may be found at <http://ich.dc.gov/publication/winter-plan-2013-2014>.

⁴ http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/crime/bodies-of-two-men-found-under-i-295/2014/04/16/95844454-c57a-11e3-9f37-7ce307c56815_story.html?hpid=z4

latter persons were reported to appear to have been homeless and to appear to have died of hypothermic conditions.⁵

All these deaths are included in this year's Hypothermia Chart, from which one can begin to assess whether or not the weather may have contributed to their deaths.

Recommendation: COHHO and the homeless services community continue to request release of at least minimal information from either the Metropolitan Police Department or Office of the Medical Examiner so that policymakers and medical professionals could examine each death in the context of other events on the date of death, with emphasis on the weather conditions. A complete list of possible hypothermia deaths would be helpful, *preferably before the annual Hypothermia Debriefing*. Full names of decedents are not necessary for this purpose. The purpose of this request is to take steps to avert such deaths in the future.

Alerts

This was a harsh winter.

- The *actual temperature* fell to 32 degrees Fahrenheit or below on 72 of the 151 days. By calendar month:
 - 7 days in November;
 - 10 in December;
 - 23 in January;⁶
 - 18 in February; and
 - 14 in March.
- *On 110 days, the Wind Chill in the District of Columbia fell below 32.* The Wind Chill was below zero degrees Fahrenheit on 7 days and at zero on 2 additional days. The lowest Wind Chill was -11 on January 6, 2014, reportedly the "coldest in years."
- Precipitation of some kind was recorded on 67 days. Snow, sleet, flurries, and freezing rain occurred on at least 15 days. Exceptional wind gusts caused additional hardship on several days.
- The City called Cold Emergencies on at least 19 days⁷ and possibly up to 22 days, according to informal but generally reliable information provided

⁵ http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/crime/dc-police-say-men-found-dead-near-i-295-likely-died-of-hypothermia-in-sudden-cold-snap/2014/04/17/5d7c3c64-c639-11e3-9f37-7ce307c56815_story.html?hpid=z3

⁶ This occurred, for example, on 15 of 16 straight days in January.

⁷ Jan. 21-30 inclusive; Feb. 9-11 inclusive; Feb. 26-28 inclusive; and March 3-5 inclusive.

to the Department of Human Services. On Cold Emergency Alerts, 3-4 locations were open as warming sites during normal business hours.⁸ On several occasions, e.g., February 9 and 11, warming buses were provided overnight at 5 sites.⁹

- The persons served in additional Cold Emergency services¹⁰ ranged from a minimum of 76 persons on a given overnight (Feb. 26) to a high of **242** on a given night (Jan. 28).
- More than 100 persons were served each date during 17 Cold Emergencies.
- More than 200 persons were served each date during four Cold Emergencies.¹¹

- The Federal and District Governments were closed on at least 5 days.¹²

Alerts were called on 100 nights during the 2013-2014 “Hypothermia Season” (November 1, 2013 to March 31, 2014).¹³

Based on actual data, it is possible that alerts should have been called during 11 additional 24-hour periods when the statutory threshold was reached. However, the Department of Human Services would like it to be pointed out that it can be difficult to match the calling of Alerts with the actual or forecasted weather status. For example, it has been stated that the weather can vary from one location in the District to another. Reported temperatures are not necessarily the same as the information provided in real time by persons from the National Weather Service, which is the basis for whether and when an alert is called. Also, if the temperature, including wind chill, reached 32 degrees, but for a very short period of time (say, at 6 am), but had not been forecasted, this may not have been a night when an alert was called.

Alerts were called on 2 nights during April 2014, i.e., April 15 and April 16.

Timing of Alerts: COHHO actually tracked the date, time and content of text messages and e-mails about the calling of alerts, termination of alerts, and reinstatement of alerts. In general, with a few exceptions, the timing of

⁸ Old DC Council Chamber, West End Library, Sherwood Recreation Center, Greenleaf Recreation Center.

⁹ Judiciary Square area, Union Station, Farragut Square area, West End Library parking lot, old DC Council Chamber.

¹⁰ Unique persons not counted elsewhere that date.

¹¹ These figures are based on snapshot counts during the overnights of that period, so that the total number of unique persons served with Cold Emergency services on each occasion may have been even higher. It is important to remember that these persons are in addition to persons served in the Shelters and other facilities that were included in the Winter Plan.

¹² Jan. 21, Feb. 13-14, March 3, March 17.

¹³ In the 2012-2013 Hypothermia Season, Alerts were called on 95 days (plus 2 alerts before November and 2 after March). 2011-2012 Hypothermia Season: 66 Alerts. 2009-2010: 104 Alerts. 2008-2009: 117 Alerts.

the calling of alerts was appropriate. More announcements were made, more reliably, and in a more timely manner, than in past years. Announcements were issued both by DHS directly and by DC HSEMA. This progress is appreciated.

Capacity

Men

The planned capacity for men in the 2013-14 Winter Plan¹⁴ was **1,376**.

The season began with 869 men in shelter, on November 1, 2013, and that was the lowest number of men in shelter during this season. **The highest number of men recorded in shelter was 1,404**, on the night of March 6, 2014, when the Wind Chill was below 32 for the 12th day in a row.¹⁵ *This usage exceeded the plan maximum by 28.*

The men's system operated at above planned capacity on 14 nights and exactly at planned capacity on one additional night.¹⁶

The following emergency shelters and hypothermia or overflow spaces for men were repeatedly operating at above capacity by the double digits: New York Avenue, Columbia Heights Recreation Center, Sacred Heart Church, St. Luke's Church, and Kennedy Recreation Center. Banneker Recreation Center was also occasionally operating at above capacity. At the beginning of the season, the following shelters were repeatedly operating at above capacity: 801 East and Adams Place.

Women

The planned capacity for women in the 2013-14 Winter Plan¹⁷ was **426**. This included overflow capacity of 25, i.e., normal capacity including seasonal and alert beds was planned at **401**.

The season began with 316 women in shelter. The lowest number of women in shelter was 311, on November 2, 2013. **The highest number of women recorded in shelter was 456**, on January 27, when the wind chill was -3.

The women's system operated at above 426 persons on 3 nights. The women's system was above 400 persons on 49 nights. These

¹⁴ Page 23 of the Plan.

¹⁵ There were 1,403 men in shelter on the night of January 30, 2014, when the Wind Chill was below 32 for the 17th day in a row.

¹⁶ The highest number of men sheltered in the previous winter was 1,355, exceeding the 1,331 in the Plan on 18 nights.

¹⁷ Page 24 of the Plan.

figures mark an increase in usage over the previous winter, when the highest number of women served on a hypothermia night was 397 on two nights, with 390 or more women served on 21 nights.

The following shelter for women was repeatedly operating at above capacity at the start of the season: Hermano Pedro. The following shelters or overflow spaces for women were occasionally operating at above capacity: Open Door, New Covenant, and Guy Mason Recreation Center.

In addition, there were two nights on which there were zero vacancies at the planned capacity levels for women, at least one night with only one vacancy, and at least one night with only two vacancies for women in the entire system.

Families

The 2013-14 Winter Plan stated¹⁸ that the “number of families expected to be referred for shelter during the 2013-2014 winter season is estimated to increase by 10% increase over the 2012-2013 winter season (**509** families in 2013-2014 up from 463 in 2012-2013). I.e., **the total number of families expected to enter the system and needing placement from start to end of the “season” was 509. This number was exceeded well before February.**

- The season began with 273 families in the system, consisting of 909 persons. On November 1, there were 233 families in DC General hospital site, 21 in motels, and 19 in scattered sites.
- The lowest number of families in the system was 273, and the lowest number of persons in families was 890.
- Snapshot:
 - November 1: 273 families 909 persons
 - December 1: 380 families 1,287 persons
 - January 1: 523 families 1,739 persons
 - February 1: 768 families 2,462 persons
 - March 1: 736 families 2,336 persons
 - March 31: 675 families 2,205 persons
- The highest number of families on one night was **775**, January 30; and the highest number of persons in families on one night was **2,470**, on both January 29 and 30.¹⁹

¹⁸ Page 25 of the Plan.

¹⁹ The wind chill had been 32 or below on 34 of the previous 36 days.

- The highest number of families in the DC General hospital site on any one night was 288, on both January 16 and 25.
- The highest number of families in motels/hotels on any one night was 472, on both January 29 and 30.
- The highest number of families in recreation centers on any one night was 24, on both February 26 and 27.
- The number of families remaining in the DC General hospital site on March 31, 2014, was 281. This number is consistent with the 288 families in DC General hospital site on March 31, 2013.
- The number of families remaining in motels/hotels on March 31, 2014, was 380. In contrast, a year earlier on March 31, 2013, there were 157 families in motels.

Highest number of persons served System-wide in Winter 2013-2014

The fewest persons of all description in the system on any one night this season was 2,090, on November 2. The highest number of persons of all description in the system on any one night was **4,279**, on January 30, 2014. That date was the 17th day in a row when wind chills fell below 32 degrees.

In contrast, in 2009-10, which included “Snowmageddon,” the highest number of clients served on one night was 2,824. The highest number in 2012-13 was 3,260, and the highest number in 2011-12 was 2,859.

Respectfully Submitted,

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 Robert Swart) COHHO Extreme Weather team