

## COLD SNAP TRIGGERS EXTRA EFFORTS TO KEEP PEOPLE SAFE

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STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, DEC. 28, 2017....Shelters have put out extra cots and homeless people across Massachusetts have hustled and improvised ways to keep warm these past few days.

As of midday Thursday no one in Massachusetts had died on account of the abnormal cold snap that has chilled the region, according to the Office of Public Safety and Security.

The frigid temperatures are a particular challenge for those without their own place to call home.

Michaelann Bewsee, of Arise for Social Justice in Springfield, said all of the shelters in western Massachusetts were at capacity on Wednesday and people have been turned away. She was particularly worried about a man and woman she spoke to last week who were living out of a tent because they didn't want to be separated at a shelter.

"I hope that they're not found dead in the spring," Bewsee told the News Service. "I hope that they're willing to put up with being separated in this weather."

While much of Massachusetts is frozen solid, an array of non-profit and government workers have leapt into action to help homeless people get indoors with a place to sleep and food to eat, according to spokespeople and advocates.

Members of the public can help, too, by donating hand-warmers, coats and winter clothes, said Karen LaFrazia, the president and CEO of St. Francis House in Boston.

St. Francis, which offers services for homeless people during the day, has opened its doors earlier in the morning to accommodate people on the street, many of whom have mental health or other issues that make it difficult for them to negotiate a shelter, LaFrazia told the News Service. On Christmas, a woman arrived at the day shelter located on the outskirts of Chinatown wearing flip flops.

"It took all of our collective efforts to convince her to put on socks and shoes," LaFrazia said.

Christmas was the last time local temperatures rose above freezing, according to Lenore Correia, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service. The cold weather is projected to continue "for at least another week," she said on Thursday. Around New Years of 1918, Boston experienced a seven-day stretch where temperatures hovered at or below 20 degrees, and the region might tie that record now a century later, Correia said.

Boston shelters added 65 beds on Wednesday night to the roughly 1,500 beds available to homeless people, according to City Hall. Shelters have added cots and offered sleeping bags, according to Kelly Turley, associate director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless.

Some people have had bad experiences with shelters, and many people without a home will spend time in fast food restaurants, emergency rooms and even Logan Airport as they "try to be as creative as possible and under the radar," Turley told the News Service.

"We work closely with the City, State and Massachusetts State Police Troop F to help find appropriate shelter and assistive services for vulnerable populations at Logan Airport who may be exposed to these dangerous temperatures," said Kelly Smith, a spokeswoman for the Massachusetts Port Authority.

Boston's safety net has worked pretty well for a 26-year-old homeless man who grew up in Cambridge and agreed to talk to the News Service on the condition that his name not be used. Spending his days at St. Francis House or the library and his nights at Boston shelters – where he said he has not had trouble finding a bed – the man who wore a scarf and gloves from St. Francis said he has not been particularly bothered by the cold. He said he has been homeless for more than a year.

St. Francis has been busy. The shelter usually gives out about 600 meals per day, and on Thursday the shelter gave out 1,054, according to LaFrazia.

The incidence of frostbite appears to have dropped over the past decade, according to Dr. Cathy Pierce, who works at the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Clinic at St. Francis. She credited more publicity about the risks the cold can present, efforts to bring people indoors, and more beds.

However, Pierce cautioned that as the subfreezing temperatures continue, she might start seeing more symptoms of exposure.

"It'll start getting worse," LaFrazia predicted. On Thursday morning a man came into St. Francis shaking from the cold and with purple hands, she said.

Clinic staff have noticed a slight uptick in "trench foot" from wet footwear.

Outreach workers from the Department of Mental Health and Pine Street Inn – who are funded by the Department of Public Health – have scoured the streets to encourage people living there to find shelter, according to the Office of Housing and Economic Development. The Department of Mental Health funds or operates 10 homeless outreach teams, and in fiscal year 2017 the department enrolled 2,667 individuals in services through homeless outreach, according to an aide.

Homeless people sometimes shelter in MBTA stations – staying tucked away even after service shuts down. Since the extreme cold began, the T has allowed people to "shelter in place at South Station," said MBTA Police Superintendent Richard Sullivan, who said there are "additional police officers present particularly during the overnight hours to ensure everyone's safety and well being."

Gov. Charlie Baker bonded with Boston Mayor Marty Walsh three years ago when bitter cold and mounds of snow tested the region's ability to handle some of the worst weather in memory.

The Department of Housing and Community Development is funding winter overflow beds at the Boston Rescue Mission, Friends of the Homeless, Father Bill's and CASPAR, helping ensure people have transportation to shelters and organizing daily calls that include Boston officials.

"Governor Baker understands bitterly cold temperatures pose a significant challenge for people across the Commonwealth, particularly the most vulnerable, and is pleased the Commonwealth is working with local officials to provide access to beds and shelters for those who need them most," said Brendan Moss, a spokesman for the governor.

The bad weather gives people a good opportunity to "show acts of kindness and compassion," said LaFrazia, suggesting that proprietors could allow homeless people to relax in their establishments and others could buy them a cup of coffee or a soup.

"There is more goodwill during the extreme cold weather," said Turley, who cautioned that businesses "don't want to become de facto shelters."

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