

How To: Winter Shelters

CASE STUDY

Severe winter weather can be a disaster for many communities, and especially for the homeless who may end up in hospitals with health complications and hypothermia due to exposure. Episcopal Relief & Development has aided dioceses and churches responding to ice storms and energy crises that significantly impact the marginalized. Some churches have developed innovative ways to deal with the chronic winter weather effects on the homeless with locally-funded programs that can easily be replicated to respond to disasters or emergencies. For the last several years, three churches in the Diocese of Virginia have been particularly engaged in providing shelters during the winter for the homeless: Christ Church in Winchester, St. Alban's in Annandale and St. Christopher's in Springfield. All three have teamed up with county homeless organizations to shelter the area's homeless for one week between November and March. Participating in a shelter program like this not only provides an essential service, but also helps prepare congregations to respond to a disaster or emergency. Organizing such a ministry ensures that the church has the experience, volunteers and space to provide aid to the most vulnerable members of their community following any emergency like severe winter storms or a flood.

START YOUR OWN WINTER SHELTER

Make sure to discuss with the vestry the best way to begin this ministry. At St. Alban's, their involvement has been a gradual process. The first three years, congregation members volunteered at other churches when they hosted and then shared their experiences with the whole congregation. This way when the request was put forth to use the parish hall as a shelter, the congregation favored the initiative.

VULNERABLE COMMUNITY

Intake is very important and can help you identify potentially vulnerable neighbors if disaster were to hit in the future. During intake, guests give their names and basic information; and in Winchester guests have the option to get a medical check-up.



Biography

Each winter, Christ Church in Winchester, St. Alban's in Annandale and St. Christopher's in Springfield, all parishes in Virginia, provide shelter to their community's homeless.

Fast Facts

CONGREGATIONS:

Christ Church, Winchester, VA

St. Alban's, Annandale, VA

St. Christopher's, Springfield, VA

LOCATION:

Diocese of Virginia

CONGREGATION SIZE:

Avg. 200

PROGRAM:

Temporary shelters and disaster preparedness

Also, all contraband is confiscated and all prescription drugs are locked away.

Engage with your guests. One of the most important aspects of this ministry for all three churches is the engagement of volunteers with guests. This human interaction is not only vital to help the well-being of guests, but it creates important links to a specific vulnerable community that will possibly need help if and when there is a disaster.

You will build useful ties to vulnerable groups within your community; this will facilitate working with them in future disaster response programs. At Christ Church many of those they serve are people with substance abuse problems, chronic medical conditions and mental health problems, who cannot be received in other facilities.

PARTNERSHIPS AND NETWORKS

Find a county program to work with. In the case of Christ Church, they helped found the county-wide organization – Winchester Area Temporary Thermal Shelter (WATTS) – that unites churches of different denominations to provide shelter on a weekly rotating schedule.

Build relationships with others and rely on them when needed. Hosting some individuals can be tricky under “Safeguarding God’s Children” guidelines, and can affect Christmas activities. In Fairfax County (St. Alban’s), a local mosque takes guests during that week.

LOCAL ASSETS

AVAILABLE RESOURCES

Identify the space you will use to host guests and manage any usage issues. At St. Christopher’s they shelter in their multipurpose room, which is also a school during the day. So Coordinator, Cathy Kozak, works with the county to book their week during school holidays so guests can keep their belongings at the shelter during the day.

Shelters are previously outfitted with necessary safety requirements as demanded by the city/state. If that space is needed during an emergency, it’s ready. The space at St. Christopher’s had to be approved by the Fire Marshall, who also decided the maximum number of guests (their max. number is 40).

Use your congregational assets. A parishioner at Christ Church is a McDonald’s franchise owner. He donated food for breakfast.

Providing showers. On-site showers aren’t a must. St. Christopher’s provides hand towels and soap for guests. Also, a room or two in a nearby motel can be reserved for guests to take showers.

Incorporate other ministries. Most guests need socks, so at St. Christopher’s they now hold a sock-specific clothing drive every

Sheltering

Sheltering might be an important response after a variety of disasters:

Winter storms may leave many without power and heat

Power outages – people in rural areas will be without power longer and may need shelter

Floods – many residents will need shelter

House and apartment fires

Unaccompanied elderly will have nowhere else to go if their homes are affected by disaster

Immigrants may feel more comfortable at a church rather than a government-supported shelter after a disaster

Preparedness:

By volunteering, church members gain experience serving in a shelter and can be called on to do it again during an emergency. The ministry at St. Christopher’s engages the entire church – from the youngest to the oldest members – with about 100 volunteers per week.

This experience may make your congregation more likely to respond during a disaster. The rector at St. Alban’s, Grayce O’Neill, is sure that they would be very willing to take people in during a disaster. If there were a local emergency, their immediate response would probably be to “just get together and do it.”



year.

VOLUNTEERS

This program is too big for just one person. Planning and managing this ministry is a team effort. At St. Christopher's they have a two-person team: one person handles logistics and the other is a representative to the county organization and to the church.

Develop a volunteer engagement strategy early on. All three churches rely heavily on previous volunteers – coordinators make sure to touch base personally with all of them. Posting flyers and advertising in the church bulletin is effective. Chris Ferguson from Christ Church says, "You can't be shy about asking people to help."

Define volunteer job descriptions ahead of time. All three churches have the same basic volunteer structure, and clearly identify how many volunteers are needed and what they will be doing during recruitment:

1. Daily volunteer coordinator: Arrives a couple of hours before the doors open and stays until the last guest has left the next day. They manage volunteers, logistics, etc. for that day
2. Team of greeters: 3-5 people arrive before doors open to serve snacks, meet guests, and help them settle in
3. Cook: Plans meals and oversees preparation and serving
4. Evening meal crew: 6-8 people prepare and serve meals
5. Breakfast crews: 6-8 people prepare and serve meals. They may also prepare sack lunches for guests to take with them
6. Night-support volunteer: Stays overnight to help guests with anything they may need and to support county staff
7. Cleaning crew: Can be any number and may include the sexton
8. Youth groups can provide entertainment: sing, play games, etc.

If someone can't participate in the ministry that evening, find other ways for them to help. In Springfield they ask volunteers to purchase food for the week or help with volunteer recruitment.

Ask medical professionals to volunteer. All three churches average about 200 members and have health professionals, social workers and case workers among their congregation; at Christ Church they ask them specifically to volunteer to help with intake and the medical check-up.

Lessons Learned:

Christ Church: Gain the trust of this specific population – they have difficulty trusting and you need that trust in order to help.

Christ Church: Talk openly with volunteers before you host – tell them what kind of people they can expect, etc. Volunteers appreciate the candor and it makes the hosting process run more smoothly.

St. Christopher's: Talk about this program – it is a very powerful ministry! It can involve many members of the congregation and volunteers are usually committed year after year.

St. Christopher's: Start volunteer recruitment early. Shelters usually run with no less than 13 volunteers a day and filling in those slots is hard. They've had years where the last slots were filled the day of!

Additional Resources:

For more information on sheltering, please see the following online resources:

"How To: Emergency Shelters"

Share your own disaster response stories or tips to help a community in need at www.er-d.org