

Sonoma County Lived Experience and Advisory Planning Board (LEAP)



Prevent Suffering & Deaths by Opening Winter Shelters

December 8, 2023

To: Sonoma County District Supervisors;

Susan Gorin, David Rabbitt, Chris Coursey, James Gore, Lynda Hopkins,

On behalf of the LEAP Board;

We strongly advise that you allocate funding for Winter Shelters, at least one in each city, to be fully operational between November 1st through March 31st every year, versus sporadic openings that make it extremely difficult for unsheltered people to be notified and travel to a Warming Center in a timely manner. Winter Shelters are more humane than Warming Centers that are dependent on too rigid of factors to activate and operate for too short of time. Some of our current Warming Centers don't allow for sleeping and have people stay outside to huddle around a propane tank all night to keep "warm".

As of today, there have been several freezing and near freezing overnight temperatures and the Warming Centers have not been activated. The Warming Center activation parameters are cruel, inhumane and restrict deployment of a life saving service. Thankfully, several agencies and community members are beginning to deploy services and open their doors to provide aid to the unsheltered. Despite these efforts, we fear the lack of adequate and ongoing financial support for winter services will continue to produce needless suffering and deaths among Sonoma County residents.

Allocating funding to expanding winter services is an essential component to operating the life saving efforts provided by various community organizations. Designating locations for Winter Shelter is another major component that we hope is being addressed by the Board of Supervisors currently.

Agencies listed on the Sonoma County Region's Warming Center Summary Information as of December 7, 2023, are using rigid parameters and limited funding which causes them to operate minimally and for sporadic durations, which results in unsheltered people suffering with preventable illnesses and death caused by exposure to winter elements. Cold weather emergency shelters should be opened well above 32 degrees F. As mentioned in the Grand Jury Report, there was little to no scientific backing for the determination of that temperature being the threshold to open warming centers, mainly by census of the working group. According to the CDC Website:¹ "While hypothermia is most likely at very cold temperatures, it can occur even at cool temperatures (**above 40°F**) if a person becomes chilled from rain, sweat, or submersion in cold water."

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury made several recommendations in their report on June 29, 2023 (listed below). **We are interested in understanding if recommendations 6-8 have been addressed. These are very clear and reasonable expectations that we want to see enacted as soon as possible.**

¹ [Hypothermia|Winter Weather \(cdc.gov\)](https://www.cdc.gov/nczod/diseases/zoonotic/d/2013/hypothermia.html)

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- ❖ R1. By September 30, 2023, the Board of Supervisors will develop and implement formal policies and procedures for protecting unhoused people in the County of Sonoma during cold weather emergencies. (F1 through F13)
- ❖ R2. By September 30, 2023, the Board of Supervisors defines the parameters to be used to declare a cold weather emergency in the County, including assignment of responsibilities for declaring and communicating a cold weather emergency to the responsible departments. (F3, F11, F12)
- ❖ R3. By September 30, 2023, the Board of Supervisors designates the County employee (as defined by the policy recommended in R1) who has the authority to declare a cold weather emergency that would initiate the opening of warming centers. (F1, F5, F11)
According to the document published by Sonoma County Emergency Planning titled 'Sonoma County Operational Area Emergency Operations Plan Annex,' it seems these 3 have been addressed.
- ❖ R4. In order for the Board of Supervisors to make informed decisions regarding the need for warming centers, by September 30, 2023, the Board will direct staff (as defined by the policy recommended in R1) to collect data, including but not limited to: the number of individuals accessing warming centers throughout the county; the cost per day of operating warming centers throughout the county; the number of individuals denied access to warming centers because of a lack of capacity; the number of unhoused individuals who died from exposure to severe cold. (F3, F4, F8)
- ❖ R5. Beginning April 1, 2024, and every year thereafter on or about April 1, the Board of Supervisors will direct the County Administrative Officer (CAO) to present an after-action report to the Board regarding the effectiveness of County staff in supporting warming centers during episodes of severe cold over the previous winter using data identified in R4, collected over the past winter, the CAO will identify both successful efforts to support warming centers and areas that need improvement. (F3, F4, F8)
- ❖ R6. By December 31, 2023, the Board of Supervisors will direct staff to identify facilities within the unincorporated areas of the County that can be used as warming centers, and sign MOUs with the management of such facilities as necessary. (F4, F6)
- ❖ R7. By September 30, 2023, the Board of Supervisors will direct the responsible department (as defined in the policy recommended in R1) to identify County facilities, including unused or underutilized facilities, that will be available to be used as warming centers for unhoused people in extreme cold weather. (F6)
- ❖ R8. By September 30, 2023, the Board of Supervisors, in accordance with its adopted policy, will provide sufficient funding to support opening and maintaining warming centers during episodes of extreme cold weather emergencies. (F6, F8) “

We, the LEAP Board, have the duty to echo the voices of our homeless population when they are too weak to advocate for themselves. You have the duty and responsibility to prevent deaths among our community. To achieve both of these for our community, is to fund Winter Shelter operations and authorize the use of unused buildings to provide Emergency Winter Shelter.

We appreciate your time and service to our community, and look forward to collaborating with you on this.

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Thank you,

Rebekah Sammet, LEAP Chair Member

Endorsed by:

The Lived Experience Advisory and Planning Board Members

-and-

Chessy Etheridge,

Heather Jackson

Mikeal O'Toole,

Victoria Yanez

Katrina Phillips, Chair Commission on Human Rights