City’s Homeless Shelters Work Together to Reach At-Risk and Young in Brutal Weather

With the polar vortex marking this winter season as one of Chicago’s coldest in recent memory, the city’s homeless youth are up against life-threatening conditions. Kids under the age of 18 are wards of the state, but as soon as youth become legal adults, they’re expected to fend for themselves on the streets. Weather emergencies have brought homeless agencies and city officials together to prevent tragedy, but as public funds for homeless aid dwindle in the face of statewide financial hardship, resources are stretched thin when need is greatest.

This winter has been the 7th-snowiest season Chicago has seen since 1894, according to WGN’s weather blog. This, in addition to subzero temperatures and frigid wind chill caused the death of a man in Logan Square early morning of Jan. 21. Thought to be in his 60s, the apparently homeless man who died from hypothermia is the 14th cold-related death this season, published the Chicago Sun-Times.

A 2013 Chicago Coalition for the Homeless analysis found more than 116,000 homeless living in Chicago. This 10 percent increase, *CCH reported*, was due to the rising number of homeless students enrolled in Chicago Public Schools. During the 2012-2013 academic year, CPS found more than 18,300 homeless kids in their enrollment charts. Of that number, an overwhelming 98 percent were minorities.

In the U.S. Conference of Mayors Hunger & Homelessness Survey for 2013, released Dec. 11, Chicago officials said that the total number of homeless families increased 11.4 percent during the year-long survey period (through August 2013). Nationally, however, the 25-city survey found homelessness increased an average of 7 percent. City officials projected that the number of individuals and families who are homeless who are homeless would “increase moderately” during 2014, though city resources would be unchanged.

“People are freezing to death in this weather. A week or two ago, it was a matter of 20 minutes for someone without proper covering to get frostbite outside,” said Eva Green, a representative of La Casa Norte, a Chicago based organization that provides housing and support services to the homeless. “The weather is extremely dangerous to the average person walking outside for 20 minutes. What if you’re outside all night or for hours at a time?”

On any given night, there are 6,276 homeless people on the streets in Chicago, according to a count conducted by the Department of Family Support Services January 2013. Green said they’re stretching their creativity and resources in order to provide for as many people as they can possibly accommodate. Not only does La Casa Norte’s three emergency shelters located in the West and Southwest parts of the city offer warm beds, the organization has also been handing out hats, scarves and coats to their clients.

La Casa Norte provides 45 emergency shelter beds to homeless youth, the largest number out of any organization in Chicago. Even so, they have had to turn away some young people seeking shelter this past weeks because their emergency housing centers were already operating at full capacity. So Flores, the executive director of La Casa Norte, said homeless youth are an especially vulnerable population because of their inexperience.

“Young people who have never experienced extreme weather situations may not know what to expect,” Flores said. "They may not know what's happening 'when my toes feel like this' or 'when I turn a certain color' or 'when it's hard to breathe.' There are certain physical health wellness skills that
they have not learned yet because of age.”

When temperatures dropped down to the negatives on the recent Sunday night-to-Wednesday morning stretch, La Casa Norte worked overtime to expand their services to 24 hour operations. They set up two drop-in centers – a place for people to grab a hot meal, get access to showers, do their laundry and counseling. Between their drop-in centers and emergency shelter hours, no one was left waiting out in the cold, said Flores.

La Casa Norte is a part of a large network of agencies working with Chicago’s Department of Family and Support Services to coordinate weather emergency responses. People seeking beds at fully-occupied shelters were redirected and transported to other open shelters in the city.

Everyone in the social services being stretched right now, said Green. Collaboration is key to helping those in need.

Anyone on the streets who needs help can call 3-1-1, Green said. The city’s non-emergency telephone number can help people find open shelters as well as transportation to shelters. However, checking into emergency housing isn’t always considered the best option for some people.

“One person I met a few weeks ago said 3-1-1 is like playing the lottery,” said Green. It’s not a solution for everyone due to long waiting times. “Some people choose to sleep in a train because it’s a guaranteed warm place and sometimes it’s a faster and safer option than waiting four hours in the cold,” said Green.

That’s where Captain Nancy Powers of the Salvation Army comes in. Powers oversees mobile unit operations that spend up to 20 hours a day going from street to street, providing hot beverages, blankets, professional assessment and medical attention to those who need it.

According to Powers, the Salvation Army mobile units have identified 31 individuals who refused to go to shelters on freezing nights. She attributes it to mental wellness issues and substance addiction.

“The problem is that some folks just won’t give up their freedom,” Powers said. “Even if they are free to come and go in the emergency shelters. They may say, ‘I won’t leave because I want to drink all night. If they would not budge under any circumstances, we gave them hot coffee, hot soup, lots of scarves and clothing. We kept up with them through the day and made sure they were doing okay.”

For young people there’s a certain stigma attached to the word “homeless” said Flores, and that keeps them away from homeless shelters and on the streets.

“They don’t identify that way,” said Flores. “They don’t use those words. They don’t want to be that person they see on TV. They are not comfortable going to an adult shelter because they don’t fit in or are not comfortable there.”

Personal harm is an issue that both adults and youth have to deal with at some homeless shelters. To some, the threat of frostbite and hypothermia is preferable to the possibility of having belongings stolen, being bitten by bedbugs, and having their personal safety endangered in shelters, said Green.

Fortunately, here has been an expansion of youth specific homeless beds in Chicago in the past year, said Jennifer Cushman, the public policy specialist for Chicago Coalition for the Homeless. She has seen an overall reduction in the number of homeless youth they have had to turn away but in general there is still more need than capacity.

“How we curtail this tragedy is how our city goes,” said Flores. “This is the future of our city.”