

Two homeless men freeze to death in New York City

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22 January 2000

Two homeless men froze to death this week as temperatures in New York City reached their lowest in about five years. The temperature dropped as low as 3 degrees Fahrenheit on Tuesday morning, and powerful winds made it feel more like 20 below zero.

One man, said to be between 40 and 50 years old, was found Monday near a building in the Sheepshead Bay area of Brooklyn. Another homeless man found him, and then contacted the police. An autopsy has concluded that death was caused by exposure. Another man, also homeless and believed to be about 55, was found Tuesday inside a car in the Jamaica area of Queens. Police concluded that the man crawled into the vehicle in a desperate attempt to escape the bitter cold.

After the discovery of the dead men advocates for the homeless condemned Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's vindictive policies on the homeless. Patrick Markee, senior policy analyst for the Coalition for the Homeless, said, "The events of the past two days underline the extraordinary dangers of the Giuliani administration proposed policy of evicting homeless people from shelters if they don't go into workfare programs and follow other requirements. The point we are trying to get across is that in other cities where the homeless don't have the right to shelters you see these kinds of deaths a lot."

The mayor has threatened to cancel the contracts of any shelters that refuse to implement his policy requiring shelter residents to work for a minimum wage or be ejected. Advocates for the homeless have contested this policy in the State Supreme Court. They have especially challenged the mayor's procedure that places children in foster care if their parents have been evicted from the shelters.

A spokesman for the city's Department of Homeless Services denied Mr. Markee's charges, and stated that

authorities had gone into different communities in an effort to encourage the homeless to go into shelters. They also said that the Health Department has declared a cold weather alert, which gives the police the authority to force the homeless into shelters or emergency rooms.

After presumably encouraging the homeless to come in out of the cold, the city administration ordered a police crackdown at shelters in every borough in the city. On Wednesday, in the middle of the night, the police arrested 125 men and women. Officials for the Homeless Services Department claimed that this was done in order to make the shelters safer, and that these individuals were apprehended due to outstanding warrants against them. However, police spokesman Sergeant Andrew McInnis said that he did not know what specific charges were contained in the warrants.

Markee from the Coalition of the Homeless said that the homeless are often given summonses for minor violations like drinking in public, obstructing sidewalks or urinating in public. One of the men was arrested for not appearing in court to respond to a charge of trespassing. Markee also explained that the homeless would rarely appear in court to answer these summonses.

One of the men who was removed from his bed and held in a cell complained that he was given a summons for urinating, but that it had little or no writing on it, and he could not figure out where or when to report. Therefore he just threw it away.

The police sweep is part of the mayor's policy of criminalizing and demonizing the homeless. Doug Lasdon, director of the Urban Justice Center, which specializes in legal services for the homeless and mentally ill, said the police action was "one way to intimidate people from using the shelters. And this is

just cruel when it's below zero.”

In the meantime, many city residents who do have homes have been suffering in the cold weather. On Tuesday, nearly 2,500 callers telephoned a hotline number, manned by the Department of Housing, Preservation and Development, to complain of the lack of heat in their apartments. On Monday, the department received 3,919 complaints, the highest number for one day in five years.

See Also:

New York's mayor calls for police crackdown on the homeless

[24 November 1999]

New York City forces homeless to work or face eviction from shelters

[30 October 1999]



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