

New York City's homeless suffer in record-breaking low temperatures

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10 January 2014

New York City homeless shelters are overflowing as hundreds of people who do not normally use the city's shelter system have sought protection from the record-breaking freezing temperatures this week. The National Weather Service reported on Tuesday, that Central Park reached a 118-year low of 4 degrees Fahrenheit (-15 C). The wind chill factor made effective temperatures much lower.

Shelters have been put under serious strain, taking in 450 more homeless individuals than they did last year, according the city's Department of Homeless Services. Shelters have resorted to putting mattresses in kitchens and closets, as well as setting up chairs for people to sleep on. Some of the homeless have symptoms of frostbite.

As with Hurricane Sandy in 2012, extreme weather has exposed the blight of extreme social inequality that plagues New York City. During that event, thousands of poor and working-class New Yorkers were forced into cramped temporary shelters. Many became homeless when the shelters closed, and remain so today.

The city now has a record 64,000 homeless people including 22,000 children. Approximately 10,000 people are believed to live on the sidewalks, parks, and subway stations, or in makeshift shelters.

The homeless are one of the most vulnerable groups of people in the city to extreme weather conditions. According to the 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) nearly 64,000 people, including 22,000 children are homeless in New York. In 2013, this means that the number of homeless people in New York City increased by 13 percent from January the previous year. The New York City Department of Human Services (DHS) and Human Resource Administration reported that over 50,000 people were

using New York City's shelters every day last September. This leaves thousands of the homeless in New York without a place to sleep.

The city's new Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio—in an attempt to distance himself from former mayor Michael Bloomberg's unpopular policies—modified the Cold Weather Emergency Procedure, better known as Code Blue, on his second day in office. Code Blue is a program that provides shelter for the homeless if temperatures drop below 32 degrees Fahrenheit. Under the Bloomberg administration, the Code Blue policy required homeless individuals to prove they had nowhere else to go or be turned away from homeless shelters even under freezing conditions.

The DHS responded to the recent cold snap by issuing a Code Blue procedure. Part of the Code Blue procedure, according the DHS's website, is doubling the number of outreach vans on the streets. Outreach workers' jobs—under a Code Blue procedure—include regularly monitoring at-risk individuals, assisting individuals to voluntarily come indoors, and involuntarily transporting at-risk individuals to psychiatric emergency rooms. The Officer of Emergency Management decided not to open warming centers on Tuesday, despite this being part of the Code Blue procedure.

Many homeless people are well aware of the outreach vans schedule and waited on the routes in order to get meals. As television news video showed, those waiting for the outreach van on Tuesday included both individuals who are already accepted into a shelter as well as those resorting to sleeping in the streets and subway.

A Code Blue also allows homeless individuals to access shelters without going through the usual bureaucratic process. Drop-in centers that provide the

homeless with showers, meals and counseling—but not beds—are open 24 hours a day until the Code Blue procedure has ended. Individuals deemed “chronically homeless” can also be transferred directly to stabilization beds.

The weather, however, still puts an enormous strain on the resources of DHS’s 250 shelters, as well as shelters not affiliated with the DHS.

Michelle Tolson, Director of Public Relations at New York City Rescue Mission, told the WSWS, “We are currently doing renovations in order to expand our shelter, so on a normal night we only take in 39 people. Because of the extreme cold we set up beds in the chapel, dining hall, and kitchen so on Tuesday night we took in between 75 and 100 people.

“The Bowery Rescue Mission had similar constraints and had to move some of the homeless over here.”

When asked about effects the cold had on those taken in, Tolson replied, “Some of the people had suffered from hypothermia or frostbite in the past. A few also were missing toes because of past experienced of being left out in the cold.”

Dozens of people, according to DHS statistics, refused shelter and continued sleeping on the streets or in the subway on Tuesday night. According to *Al Jazeera America*, numerous homeless people were harassed by Amtrak police and forced to leave Penn Station.

The extreme cold conditions also kept emergency workers on alert as they responded to calls related to hypothermia, frostbite, and people falling on ice. According to NBC New York, “at Tuesday’s temperatures, frostbite could develop in just 10 minutes.” *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke to Steve, who was waiting in line in the frigid temperatures for the 10:30 AM meal at the Holy Apostle Church soup kitchen in lower Manhattan. “I just got out of prison,” he said. “I came to a three-quarter house instead of parole. It is better than prison. It is little better than the shelter system, with a small, private room. The shelter system tries to relieve itself by putting people to three-quarter housing.”

Three-quarter housing, usually for those released from prison who have substance abuse problems, house an estimated 10,000 people in New York City. The programs are largely unregulated and, according to a study last year, often provide housing that is vermin-

infested and in violation of building code standards.

When asked about the government and homelessness, Steve said, “De Blasio is talking a good game. I hope he is not fronting.”

Throughout the city, other workers who have apartments were forced to live without heat because of the failure of their landlord to provide it, despite the legal requirement for an apartment to be at least 68 F (20 C) between 6:00 AM and 10:00 PM if the outside temperature is lower than 55 F (12 C).

According to the *New York Times*, “The first week of 2014, even before the piercing cold of Tuesday, complaints about lack of heat were nearly double what they were during the same period last year. There were 2,900 complaints alone on Tuesday before 3:30 PM.”

Cold weather—even when a person is inside an apartment—can have an adverse effect on a person’s health, particularly for people who already suffer from preexisting medical conditions.

One woman, who suffered from an asthma attack while inside her frigid apartment on Tuesday and had to be hospitalized, told NBC New York, “I had on two quilts over my blanket and I was still freezing. And here the asthma started coming, I couldn’t breathe.”



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