As temperatures drop, overcrowded New York City shelters forced to turn away homeless

Isaac Finn
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On Friday, temperatures in New York City dropped to two degrees Fahrenheit, the lowest on record, driving tens of thousands of the city's homeless to seek refuge from the cold anywhere they could find it.

The city's Department of Homeless Services declared Code Blue emergencies every night last week. During such emergencies, homeless shelters are required to accept anyone who asks for help during the day, but most are unable to provide beds for those who show up.

Outside the daytime-only drop-in center on West 30th Street in Manhattan, Daniel, 47, explained that he was staying at a shelter at a nearby church at night. "The church is crowded now because, in addition to all the beds filled, they leave it open to let 'strays' come in." Those who are not permanently staying in the shelter are forced to leave at a certain time. "I don't know if they know where to go next."

Daniel added, "They should have a program where shelter is supplied to the homeless, not where we are sitting on chairs crowded on top of each other."

Last Thursday, New York City Rescue Mission housed 140 people—double its usual capacity—and was forced to lay out mats on the chapel floor and place chairs in the corridors.

"We never had this kind of cold weather before, and in my opinion it is only going to get worse," said Jamie Boomer, who was visiting the shelter on 30th street.

"All of last January, I was on the street and I had to do all kinds of things to keep warm. I slept on trains and subway stations. I have even slept under a car. It is especially hard for me in this weather because I am anemic, so I have to wear multiple layers to stay warm."

Asked if he had seen any changes for the homeless under the administration of New York City Bill de Blasio, Boomer responded, "I think politics is a scam, and I don't think these people know what life is like for us."

The de Blasio administration has also phased out warming centers—short-term emergency shelters operating during cold weather—which existed as part of Code Blue procedures under the previous administration. Last winter, the Office of Emergency Management chose not to open warming centers, and references to the emergency shelters have been removed from the DHS's website.

While New York City law requires that apartments be heated to at least 68 degrees between 6AM and 10PM, many landlords do not maintain this standard. Residents at Claremont Houses in the Bronx, part of the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), lost heat after the boiler broke last Tuesday night.

NYCHA, the country's largest affordable housing program, has long been criticized for leaving buildings in disrepair, with residents at Washington, Polo Grounds and Taft complexes claiming to have inconsistent heating and hot water.

According to the City of New York's website, 3,595 people called to file a complaint about inadequate heat or hot water between February 20th and 21st. The previous Sunday, the Office of Emergency Management received more than 1,000 complaints related to heating, almost twice as many as they usually receive.

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