# COVID-19 begins to rip through homeless population as 30 test positive in New York City shelters

**Sam Dalton, Clara Weiss**
**25 March 2020**

On Tuesday, 30 cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in 22 different homeless shelters in New York City. Given the still limited testing for the virus in the New York area and the crowded and unsanitary conditions in homeless shelters, the real number of infections is undoubtedly many times higher. Eight of those infected have been hospitalized, while five of the individuals who tested positive have left the shelter system.

New York City is currently the center of the coronavirus pandemic in the US.

As of Tuesday, New York state had 26,638 confirmed cases, and New York City had over 15,500. New York thus accounts for 7 percent of the world total of coronavirus cases and has an infection rate of 1 per 1,000 residents, on a par with that of Italy.

Among those at particular risk of getting infected and dying from COVID-19 is the city's huge homeless population, which is around 80,000 people on any given day. In 2018-2019, 114,000 children experienced homelessness. That is one in ten school children in the city, an increase of 70 percent over the past decade. Around 44,000 of them lived in shelters.

The particular vulnerability of the homeless population, like that of prison inmates and immigrants in detention facilities, has long been known and medical journals have warned of the spread of COVID-19 to these locations. On March 11, the leading medical journal *The Lancet* published a report warning that the homeless are extremely vulnerable to the virus for a number of reasons linked to their abject poverty.

Accommodations used by the homeless provide perfect conditions for the rapid spread of the contagion. Shelters see high numbers of individuals living in proximity, and many of them have been brought together from various parts of the city and may have interacted with hundreds of people.

New York's shelters rarely provide adequate access to hygiene supplies and facilities, and placement in them is only available to those listed in the city's homeless database. Those who are not registered are often thrown onto the street. For the unsheltered, the unsanitary conditions of encampments, abandoned buildings, and sidewalks also contribute to the spread of the disease.

A 25-year old worker at a family shelter in New York City told the WSWS that the city was not doing anything to alleviate the significant pressures and dangers facing people in the shelters. "They're not even giving the families hand sanitizers. My shelter has 70-75 families. Everything is set up in apartment style and people are in each other's face."

She said that the number of homeless people living in shelters continues to increase. She noted that fewer and fewer people have been leaving the shelters, because the city provides vouchers of only $1,323 for two people, far too little for two people to find a place in New York City, which has one of the most expensive housing markets in the world.

On Monday, the *City* reported that hospitals, already overwhelmed by the surge in cases, are sending homeless people who have tested positive for COVID-19 back to the shelters if they are not deemed to be in need of acute medical care. The Department of Homeless Services (DHS) has been scrambling to set up isolation spaces for infected residents.

In addition, the homeless population suffers disproportionately from chronic health conditions that

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put it at graver risk of death from the virus. Another factor is the prevalence of drug addiction within the population. On the one hand, the weakening effects of addiction on a person's immune system mean that an infection is more likely to lead to death. On the other, the sharing of paraphernalia and needles in drug use provides the highly infectious virus increased opportunity to spread. Between July 2018 and June 2019, a record number of 404 homeless people died in New York City.

Taken together, these conditions provide a recipe for a disastrous spread, not only among the homeless population, but also among shelter workers and the population at large.

Workers at homeless shelters are under particular threat of infection due to their exposure and shortage of protective equipment. They are deemed "essential" and in many cases are not allowed to work from home.

One shelter worker told the WSWS that the DHS "would not follow the executive order to reduce the workforce and are only doing 50 percent staffing this Monday. Nothing is being done to protect us at all. ...We don't have hand sanitizer wipes or other cleaning products, a homemade mixture of water and bleach is being used. Social workers have to buy their own cleaning products. An email from the director states that 'Our funders want us there.'"

A social worker at a family shelter who is required to go into the office two days a week told the WSWS: "When we first heard about COVID-19 my shelter wasn't doing anything. …. Now we have resident assistants that are not able to work from home and literally do not wear masks. …Now that unemployment is skyrocketing, many [social workers] are at home. Many family members of my colleagues have been laid off." The average income of a social worker in a New York shelter ranges from $38,000 to $55,000 a year.

The indifference of the Democratic-led city and state governments in the face of a public health disaster that was predicted if there was no significant intervention has been nothing short of criminal.

In response to the initial detection of coronavirus in the homeless shelter system on March 20, a DHS spokesperson simply pledged to explore options in dealing with the crisis. Mayor de Blasio's callously stated, "Shelters by definition are going to be harder in some cases to deal with physically than others."

In February, City Council Speaker Corey Johnson announced that the city would provide an extra 200 residences for the homeless to confront the looming outbreak. Johnson and fellow Democratic Councilman Stephen Levin also suggested that "being on the street may be safer than being in a dormitory-style shelter" for the homeless.

This policy of malign neglect is putting the health and lives of hundreds if not thousands of homeless people and social workers are at risk.

New York City, home to the largest number of billionaires and millionaires in the world, has over 250,000 empty apartments. This means that for every homeless person there are three vacant properties.

As the Socialist Equality Party demands in its March 17 program of action in response to the COVID-19 crisis, "To the extent that private property gets in the way of emergency measures, it must be swept aside. …. office buildings and similar structures, many of which are now empty," must be converted "into hospitals and clinics" and "used to provide emergency housing for the homeless and for students who are being forced to leave college dormitories."

While New York is currently the center of the COVID-19 outbreak in the US, without serious containment measures the spread of the disease will assume similarly explosive dimensions in other parts of the country, affecting the homeless population everywhere.

On March 17, the governor of California warned that as many as 60,000 homeless individuals could catch the virus. Meanwhile, in Washington state, authorities have used a state of emergency declaration by the governor to evict homeless people from their shelters so that they can be used to care for COVID-19 patients.

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