BITTER COLD, MORE EVICTIONS, AN ONGOING PANDEMIC
Pittsburgh Mercy's Winter Shelter steps up to meet the need

Since its opening on November 15, the Winter Shelter — part of Pittsburgh Mercy’s Operation Safety Net outreach program for those experiencing homelessness — has faced some new as well as continuing challenges:

- More persons in need due to the end of Allegheny County’s eviction moratorium;
- An early onset of freezing temperatures; and
- The ongoing pandemic, with the Delta variant driving a fourth wave of COVID-19 infections and Omnicron spreading across the US.

More people on the street
On Nov. 1, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court denied extending Allegheny County’s eviction moratorium that had provided some security for over 12,000 residents. “This year, with the moratorium ending, we are seeing an increase in people losing their residence and ending up on the street,” said Jacqueline Hunter, senior manager of homeless services at Pittsburgh Mercy. The shelter has reached capacity limits most nights since it opened for the season. The 61-person maximum limit — put in place last year due to pandemic-related extra social-distancing measures — remains in place.

Winter weather arrives early
Just four nights after its opening, temperatures dipped below 30 degrees. That makes the Winter Shelter literally a lifesaver — providing warm meals, a place to sleep, showers, and laundry. But freezing conditions mean more medical issues. Ms. Hunter notes that about 80% of shelter visitors lack warm clothing, leading to hypothermia and frostbite. Dr. Jim Withers, the founder of Operation Safety Net, treats homeless visitors regularly during cold months. “We have a lot of cold fingers and toes because people don’t have the adequate boots and gloves,” he said. “We do watch for individuals who are known to have previously had frostbite, because we know by studies that they’re more likely to get it again, and they’re more likely to be the ones who don’t make it as well.” While these are typical issues every winter, the shelter is now in its second year of also dealing with pandemic-related challenges.
Containing the spread of COVID-19 at the Shelter

Allegheny County continues to experience very high rates of COVID-19 transmission. In addition to adhering to all safety protocols from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Allegheny County Health Department, the shelter has numerous precautions in place to help ensure safety:

- Only persons served, staff, and clinical volunteers are permitted inside the shelter.
- Meals, provided by Community Kitchen Pittsburgh, are pre-packaged and served grab-and-go style, consistent with CDC protocols.
- Vaccinations are encouraged and provided on site.
- Masks are required and sleeping mats are separated with lines of tape to keep distance.
- Weekly COVID tests are required and done onsite, regardless of vaccination status, with bi-weekly testing, follow-up medical care, and tracking occurring as needed.
- Anyone who is symptomatic or has been exposed to the virus is rerouted to a participating hotel for isolation.

How you can help
Along with numerous government and community grants, the Winter Shelter relies on the support of our generous donors. If you’d like to help:

- Monetary donations are welcome and appreciated, either online or by mail to Pittsburgh Mercy, Attention: Development Office, 1200 Reedsdale St., Third Floor, Pittsburgh, PA 15233-2109. Please be sure to note “Winter Shelter” on the check’s memo line.
- To schedule a donation of clothes (socks, gloves, boots, shoes, thermal clothing, sweatpants, sweatshirts), sleeping bags, or personal hygiene kits, call 412-232-5739, ext. 4, or email Operationsafetynet@pittsburghmercy.org. Please do not bring donations to the shelter.

Providing Holiday Gifts for Individuals in our Residential Programs

Staying safe has meant that we forgo some of our typical holiday celebrations. Instead of parties, we are taking a bit of joy directly to each of the 360 individuals who live in our residential programs.

With support from the Edith L. Trees Charitable Trust and gifts donated by our generous Pittsburgh Mercy colleagues, each of our residents will receive a hand-delivered personal gift before Christmas.

Thanks to our colleagues who volunteered their time earlier this week to wrap all of the gifts!
HAPPY HOLIDAYS!

On behalf of each person who received care at Pittsburgh Mercy in 2021, thank you for helping to make this critical work possible.

Because of you, we were able to continue to serve those in need in the tradition of the Sisters of Mercy.

Wishing you the very best this holiday season and a healthy and happy New Year.