

Tacoma Pierce County Community Branch Shelter Consultations

Executive Summary

August 2020

Introduction & Background

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is an illness caused by a virus that can spread from person to person. Health departments and healthcare facilities should be aware that people who are homeless are a particularly vulnerable group for COVID-19. The homeless and unsheltered are at increased risk due to congregate living for those in shelters and decreased access to sanitation and hygiene for those living unsheltered. Also, many people who are homeless are older adults or [have underlying medical conditions](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-medical-conditions.html) and may also be at greater risk for severe illness than the general population. Transmission of COVID-19 in Pierce County among people experiencing homelessness has remained relatively low (March-August 2020) but the impacts of COVID-19 have contributed to an increase in emergency shelter usage, and/or lead to illness and absenteeism among homeless service provider staff.

Per CDC guidelines, planning and response to COVID-19 transmission among people experiencing homelessness requires a “whole community” approach, which means involving partners in the development of response planning, and clearly defining roles and responsibilities. Therefore, the Community Branch was activated as a partnership between the Pierce County Human Services Division and the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department. As such, consultations with the public health department employee activated in the Community Branch as part of the COVID-19 Response was initiated. The information from this report comes from those consultations with local shelter providers.

The week leading up to 8/17/20, a listserv of shelter providers were contacted via email with an invitation to receive a 30-minute consultation service by Manu Rodriguez, a public health consultant with Tacoma Pierce County Public Health Department (TPCHD). The consultations provided an opportunity for providers and staff to talk and work through the unique challenges of each shelter. Consultations with shelter staff would allow health department staff to improve existing processes related to COVID-19 response efforts.

Key Findings

A total of 9 shelter providers and/or staff members were consulted. Baseline information on COVID health and safety and the most updated local health department and CDC recommendations were provided at each consultation. Successes, areas of improvement, and outstanding concerns were identified.

The following **primary themes** were identified as significant COVID-19 and shelter specific gaps and needs:

* + - Adjustments to shelter cleaning routine and facility operations
    - Adopting preventative measures such as social distancing and mask-wearing
    - Anticipated challenges developing a sustainable plan given the dynamic nature of pandemic and upcoming seasonal changes

Adjustments to Shelter Cleaning Routines and Facility Operations

Shelter providers and staff all self-reported more rigorous cleaning routines at their facilities in adherence with Tacoma Pierce County Health Department, Department of Health (DOH), and CDC guidelines. The majority of shelters consulted stated they implemented, albeit not enforced, new max capacity policies in certain communal spaces/shared living spaces like laundry rooms or kitchens. Despite occasional shortages of PPE from regular suppliers affiliated with their facility, shelter providers have tracked down supplies when they run low on their own. Given the risk of transmission with congregate settings, shelter providers have posted flyers and signage with COVID-19 health and safety guidance in high traffic areas of their facilities, beds have been reorganized and dividers have been incorporated into the sleeping area when possible. Shelters have not seen dramatic turnovers in guests and the influx of new guests has reduced greatly since the shelter in place order was first announced.

Adopting preventative measures (i.e. social distancing, testing, mask-wearing, etc.)

Shelter providers have been adopting and promoting practices and behaviors at their facilities that are proven by research to reduce transmission of COVID-19 to the best of their ability. Considering limitations with space to isolate and quarantine potentially infectious guests, some shelter providers have worked to overcome these challenges by promoting more frequent sanitation and hygiene practices with their staff and guests, encouraged social distancing, distributed cloth coverings and promoted regular usage, and partnered with community mobile testing (Pierce County Emergency Management and Health Department run) to provide COVID-19 testing directly at their facility. Shelter providers and staff have used health department messaging and COVID-19 health and safety guidance while onboarding new staff and training current staff on how to prevent the spread of disease at their facilities. Masks wearing, in particular, have become a norm, and shelter providers are interested in developing policies to address non-compliance.

Anticipated challenges developing a sustainable plan

Early and sustained action to slow the spread of COVID-19 will keep staff and volunteers healthy, and help local shelters maintain normal operations while implementing new health and safety guidance at their respective facilities. Shelter provider’s most important value is now one of their biggest fear; an open door, “all are welcome” shelter. While shelter providers have largely made proper accommodations and enhanced public health prevention measures, the majority remain concerned about the sustainability of their current plans. While plans may be effective, the reality is that there will be more homeless people in our community in need of shelter and services. Shelter providers feel responsible for helping these individuals but realize welcoming new guests may come at the expense of the health of their current staff and guests. As temperatures drop and with the approaching influenza season, given the risk-factors of several guests, shelter providers look to the health department for guidance on overcoming these moral and public health challenges.

This document can be used to:

* Raise awareness among the public, TPCHD health professionals, and policymakers about the importance of targeted COVID-19 intervention to general health and quality of life for populations living homeless.
* Understand some of the pandemic related challenges experienced by shelter guests, shelter providers, and shelter staff.
* Track any shelter-based unmet needs and progress related to COVID-19 response efforts from the health department
* Inform measurements of TPCHD’s progress toward state and national public health objectives.
* Learn about the utilization of community resources available, such as mass PPE distribution projects and other human services at the state and county levels.
* Identify and pursue partnerships within existing public health resources and other public health areas such as immunizations and behavioral health.
* Provide information to decision-makers on the successes, challenges, gaps, and lessons learned related to COVID-19 Response including communication and messaging.
* Aid in the planning of trauma-informed and culturally responsive public health promotion and disease prevention programs.

Outstanding Needs and Concerns

* No Isolation and Quarantine Center for Unaccompanied Minors
* Inconsistent suppliers for PPE and cleaning products
* Housing policies and protections for guests in low-income housing facilities in the event that isolation and quarantine is required
* Consequences of self-disclosure of COVID-19 testing with certain guests to an employer
* Scheduling issues and delays for community mobile testing
* Mask/cloth covering compliance with youth and children
* Confidentiality safeguards for guests at domestic violence shelters
* Space limitations for children commencing remote learning (school)
* Fear of turning unsheltered individuals in need of housing during upcoming seasonal changes (i.e. colder weather)

Recommendations

**COVID-19 Testing and Flu Vaccination Joint Clinic**

Efforts to immunize members of the community via immunization clinics should include shelters (staff and guests) and if possible, coordinated with any upcoming mobile testing scheduled at the shelters. When asked if there was a preference for same-day COVID-19 Testing and Flu Shot clinic or separate days for each, shelter providers and staff unanimously preferred for a same day flu immunizations clinic and COVID-19 testing event. Involve shelter providers in decision making and planning process as often as possible through follow-up questions and information gathering to ensure maximum reach of immunized and COVID-19 tested guests.

**Find Outlet for Procuring Product and Supplies**

Based on concerns from a few shelter providers and anecdotal evidence of limited supply in community, efforts should be initiated to create a repository for COVID-19 related disinfectants and supplies for shelter providers. The Coalition to End Homelessness, local and state health department, human services, and other agencies could partner to support a sustainable and reliable outlet for shelter providers to access disinfectant supplies and PPE.

**Provide Guidance and Consultation for Inclement Weather Changes**

As temperatures drop with the upcoming fall and winter seasons, and the threat of COVID-19 spread remains uncertain, shelter providers worry that they will be forced to close their doors to the most vulnerable of guests. Any health advisories related to climate should consider the lived realities and challenges for shelter providers and congregate living facilities. Written health and safety guidance should be provided for shelter providers far enough in advance for shelters to prepare their facility with adequate resources and to implement safeguards in partnership with other community spaces that can provide shelter for as many unsheltered individuals as possible while continuing to protect current guests and staff.

**Build off the success of consultations for COVID-19 to respond to questions for shelter providers**

Consistent and accurate information during this dynamic pandemic is vital, especially for populations that are at increased risk of exposure including those living in congregate settings. Important updates with COVID-19 health and safety guidance assumed to be implemented easily for the general population should be tailored to include the limitations and needs of shelters. A decision tree or Q&A document should be created and provided for providers and their staff. Existing channels of communication could be used to set up future consultation with shelters for public health guidance and feedback (i.e. COVID-19 and flu).

Acknowledgments

Tacoma Rescue Mission

Family Shelter and Jefferson Low Income Housing

Comprehensive Life Resources

Serra House Shelter (The Coffee Oasis)

The Salvation Army of Tacoma

Korean Women’s Association

Community Youth Services – No Response

Catholic Community Services Family Housing Network

Metropolitan Development Council

Nativity House/Stability House

Bethlehem Family Shelter