



YSS To Open Winter Freeze Shelter At Hillcrest Soon

By ALAN OLSON
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WHEELING — Though an opening date remains up in the air, Youth Services System's Winter Freeze Shelter soon will be returning to its new location at the former Hillcrest site.

The city of Wheeling had recently offered the space at the former OVMC building to YSS to continue operating its Winter Freeze Shelter, which normally opens in mid-December. Betsy Bethel-McFarland, Director of Communications for YSS, said a definite opening date for the shelter is uncertain while the space is cleaned and the employees trained.

"This week, our maintenance team is in there, assessing the situation, looking at if we need to fix anything or that everything's in shape," Bethel-McFarland said. "We also have our team of employees that will be working for the Winter Freeze Shelter. It's a seasonal job and we have a few new employees, so we need to get them trained."

The normal opening date for the shelter is Dec. 15, but Bethel said there is a chance it could open sooner. Tied into this is the possibility that a homeless encampment near 18th Street could be cleared out, which may necessitate an earlier opening date.

The shelter was held at Hillcrest for the first time in 2020, which was a dramatic improvement in living conditions, Bethel-McFarland said. While normally hosted at the Hazel-Atlas Building with dorm-style accommodations, the expanded living space afforded at Hillcrest was a boon not just for the residents' warmth, but for their temperaments.

"It was fantastic. It was so great. The people that came to stay with us were thrilled to have private rooms, showers, their own bathrooms," she said. "In years past, ... it's been more of a dorm-style environment, with shared bathrooms and no showers. This facility is way, way better."

"... It worked out really well. We served 194 individuals between Dec. 14 and March 15, and had very few issues, I think simply because people were happier to be in this place. They were grateful and didn't want to make any waves, to make sure we'd be allowed to come back. We're thrilled that the city has invited us to come back."

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The move to Hillcrest was spurred on by COVID-19 concerns, which necessitated more living space. Bethel said the precautions taken the previous year -- more spread-out accommodations and the widespread use of gloves, masks, cleaning supplies, and other essentials -- have not changed this time around.

The Winter Freeze Shelter is available to any nonviolent person 18 years or older, including those intoxicated or inebriated.

Elsewhere in the Ohio Valley, the Salvation Army in Wheeling provides shelter to men, and the Salvation Army in Bellaire provides shelter to anyone, Bethel-McFarland said. The YWCA in Wheeling provides shelter to those suffering from domestic abuse situations, and Northwood provides shelter to those with a substance abuse disorder.

"One of the nice things about our Winter Freeze Shelter is that it's a 'low barrier' ... shelter, and we'll take pretty much

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anybody over the age of 18, as long as you're not violent," Bethel-McFarland said. "If you don't have an ID, that's OK. If you're drunk or high, that's okay, you just can't be violent."

The shelter holds a maximum capacity of between 35 and 40 individuals. The shelter has helped more than 1,600 people since its inception in 2009.

To assist the shelter,

Bethel-McFarland asked for donations of winter gloves, which were the most in-demand of donated goods. Also needed were pillows, as most pillows they have on hand are subpar. As always,

warm winter coats, hats, scarves, boots, base layers and hygiene items are also appreciated.

Monetary donations are also highly appreciated, as YSS provides funding for emergency housing

for families, occasionally at hotels or by providing transportation to relatives or friends who can help. Help is also offered by assisting with rent or utilities to prevent homelessness.