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# The Columbus Dispatch

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# High demand leaves homeless shelters full

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By **Rita Price**

*The Columbus Dispatch* • Sunday January 4, 2015 5:30 AM

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For Bryant Johnson to avoid sleeping on the street, one of two things needed to happen: The temperature had to dip even lower, or he had to get good and drunk.

The shelter system was full on a recent night and wouldn't squeeze in any more men — or send them to motels — unless the weather stayed well below freezing, he said. Maryhaven's engagement center had beds, but to get in, a person has to be publicly inebriated and incapable of self-care, in addition to being homeless.

"There's something wrong with all this," Johnson said, shaking his head. "I'm going to have to drink to get a mat."

This was supposed to be the winter when waiting lists finally disappeared, when no one seeking shelter in Franklin County could be told to take a number and call back.

But the Community Shelter Board says that unprecedented demand has left it unable to fulfill that promise as planned, at least when it comes to homeless men.

Families with children and single women — two homeless groups whose numbers are surging — are taking up more resources and space at the board's new shelter than anyone could have imagined, Executive Director Michelle Heritage said.

Families with kids never have been turned away, and with the new Van Buren shelter near Franklinton open, single women aren't, either.

Men, however, still can be subject to a waiting-list policy that was supposed to have been abolished along with the opening of the new shelter.

"Where we're at right now is a pretty simple equation," Heritage said. "The amount of people in need and the resources we have to serve them is not equal. When that happens, we have to start looking at how to prioritize."

Provider agencies funded through the board have been told that they will receive cuts during the current fiscal year — and probably the next — of roughly 5 percent. The board also decided that a \$227,000 homeless-outreach program headed by Maryhaven, which had been fully supported by the board, will have to find the money elsewhere.

Outreach workers fan out across the county to make contact with homeless people and provide them with links to services and help.



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Bryant Johnson, 53, huddled with 16 other people outside the Open Shelter after not being able to get out of the cold.

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"I have a great deal of confidence that this community will not allow the outreach program to go away in February," said Paul Coleman, president and CEO of the Maryhaven drug-and-alcohol-treatment center. "It is too important."

Heritage said that provider agencies have been kept apprised of the situation and updated on the increase in homelessness, which is up 79 percent for families and 16 percent for single adults over the past three years.

An advocacy group, however, says the shelter board has not communicated openly, won't meet with group members and isn't seeking sufficient community input.

In a letter to Heritage on Dec. 22, the board of the Columbus Coalition for the Homeless said that forcing people to remain outside at temperatures above 25 degrees is "a possibly fatal regulation."

The coalition said it's unclear how the shelter board could have failed to anticipate the scope of demand for services.

"The rise in family homelessness is not a new phenomenon in Columbus, with steady increases in shelter need over the past three years," the letter said. "For quite some time, there has also been an insufficient number of beds for men and women, as demonstrated through waiting lists in 2012 and 2013 during times of extreme temperature."

Kent Beittel, executive director of the Open Shelter, said the shelter board plays catch-up because it isn't in touch with the situation on the ground. His agency provides food, clothing, support and day services, but no overnight beds.

"Is cogent planning happening in Columbus, Ohio?" Beittel asked. "The answer is no."

Heritage said the coalition's criticism is unwarranted. "I think they are concerned, and they are advocates, and that's good," she said. "But I think it is extremely unfair to make a claim that (the shelter board) is not working on all fronts, because we are."

She said a study commissioned by the Columbus Foundation is expected to provide insight on reasons for the sharp spike in family homelessness, which is affecting the entire system. A family shelter — the city's second — also is being added at the Van Buren site and is to open this year.

Johnson and his brother, Steve, who also is homeless, said they agree that homeless children and women should get shelter first.

"But that does leave you up a creek," said Steve Johnson, 50.

Steve said he also called for shelter recently and was told that the weather wasn't bad enough to send men to a motel for overflow beds.

"You're saying that from where you're sitting in your chair," he told the person on the phone. "Out here, it's plenty cold."

rprice@dispatch.com

@RitaPrice

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