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SHELTER COOK COUNTY: HOMELESS SYSTEM RESPONSE TO COVID-19

113,000 nights of emergency shelter for more than 1,200 individuals experiencing homelessness.

That is what the members of the [Alliance to End Homelessness in Suburban Cook County](#) have accomplished since the shelter-in-place order was issued on March 20th. Members of the Alliance have taken extraordinary steps adapting to the pandemic, securing rooms in local hotels for those with nowhere safe to stay. Some of the 1,200 came from homeless shelters that were in operation, while others were pushed over the brink into homelessness due to the impact of the pandemic.

Unfortunately, the hotel solution is temporary. The community must decide where hundreds of people will go when the stream of COVID-relief funding for hotels dries up. Going back to the way things were is not an option. And ending shelter for the hundreds of vulnerable households staying in hotels is unacceptable.

Most of the emergency shelters in suburban Cook County before the pandemic were seasonal, meaning they were not open in the summer. Shelter sites were hosted by churches and other houses of worship, providing sleeping pads on the floor and rotating to different sites each night of the week. These sites depended largely on volunteers, many of whom are retirement age and needed to stay home as soon as the pandemic hit. Rotating shelters were central to how suburban Cook County responded to homelessness pre-COVID, but as churches remain closed for the foreseeable future, we don't know when or if shelters can return to this model. Prior to the pandemic, seasonal rotating shelter served an average of 250 people a night, compared to the 650 people currently in hotels or other shelter options spurred by the pandemic.

Members of the Alliance have been working tirelessly since the beginning of the pandemic to provide emergency housing in hotels, assist families unable to pay their rent, and help people find safe and affordable places to call home. The solution to homelessness is housing, and the Alliance and its members are mobilizing to move hundreds of people out of homelessness and into their own homes. Despite our best efforts, suburban Cook County needs more resources to meet the needs of a growing number of households who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. We need additional support from the community and all levels of government to respond to this crisis.

On the national level, we need Congress to pass the next federal COVID-19 relief bill to address the ongoing economic impacts of the public health crisis. Locally, we need support from the state, county, and municipalities to fund crisis housing and permanent housing options for the hundreds of people who are homeless or on the brink of homelessness. Entitlement money that municipalities receive, such as Community Development Block Grant and Emergency Solutions Grant money, must be prioritized for homeless services and affordable housing. Municipal code that makes it difficult to create and sustain affordable housing must be changed. And municipalities must start courting affordable housing developers, start finding new sources of revenue for housing, and stop prioritizing the voices of a minority of community members who oppose affordable housing in their neighborhoods.

We need community members to voice their support to local and national leaders for efforts to prevent and end homelessness in our community. We need community members to volunteer and donate to local nonprofits that provide homeless services. And we need landlords to partner with homeless service providers to make their units available to those transitioning from homelessness to housing.

We all have a choice to make. The Alliance urges the community to work with us to ensure that the hundreds of people staying in hotels never need to experience homelessness again because of a lack of housing options. We are choosing to create a community where everyone has a safe and stable place to call home. Join us.



For a complete list of Alliance member organizations and how they're responding to COVID-19, visit www.suburbancook.org/support