

Interrupting disease transmission is necessary to limit the impact of COVID-19. New protocols are necessary at the community and shelter operations levels to achieve this goal. Areas of the U.S. may require additional shelter capacity at different times of the year to limit the impact of severe weather on unsheltered households. Extreme heat and cold, severe weather, and other factors that endanger unsheltered households necessitate enhanced planning at the local level to adapt to COVID-19. Many shelters must begin preparing for Fall and Winter, when the change in weather may make it unsafe to be outside in freezing temperatures. This infographic provides several recommendations for shelter best practices when serving guests in colder months.

1. Stay open 24 hours a day

Shelters that stay open 24 hours provide guests with a climate-controlled refuge from the elements. 24-hour access also offers access to bathroom and hand washing facilities, a place to rest, and minimizes the transmission risk guests may face if they are forced to vacate and use public transportation or public buildings to stay warm. Having guests in the shelter 24/7 may require providers to 1) add additional staff to accommodate the additional workload; 2) reconfigure floorplans to ensure adequate access to hand washing facilities and so guests can maintain social distancing; and 3) increase cleaning schedules.

Expanding operating hours equates to increased costs, and shelter providers will need to seek out resources to cover additional expenses. This [document](#) provides a non-exhaustive list of funding sources for shelters.

Operating shelters 24/7 is a huge undertaking. Executive Directors and other leaders should ensure there are enough staff to handle the additional workload and that shelter staff are taking adequate breaks and engaging in [self-care](#). Taking care of others is mentally and physically exhausting, so staff should look out for signs of [burnout, anxiety, and fatigue](#), as well as signs of illness. If an increase in staff or salaries is not feasible, consider offering benefits such as long weekends, schedule flexibility, or other options to increase staff satisfaction.

Many shelters have an [inclement weather policy](#). Shelters can alter this policy to include new or expanded activities for COVID-19, including new operating hours.

2. Provide meals in the shelter

Shelters that provide meals limit the need for guests to seek out their own food sources from restaurants, grocery stores, or on the street. This reduces the exposure of guests to more populated and less socially distant places outside of the shelter. It also reduces the stress of having to seek out meals and instead focus on housing stability and rehousing options during a challenging time.

Shelters should consider procedures for unsheltered persons that want to come to the shelter for meal service but do not want to stay overnight or receive other services. The influx of unsheltered persons may strain the existing meal service, so shelters should plan accordingly to accommodate the additional guests.

For shelters that serve meals, protocol on food safety and handling can be found in resources from the [American Red Cross](#), [CDC](#), and in the [Infectious Disease Toolkit for CoCs](#).

3. Reserve beds (don't make people stand in line every day)

Allowing guests to have a regular, identified place to call their own follows the guest-centered approach and minimizes the risk of disease transmission by reducing the spread of germs due to daily bed assignment changes. Beds should be at least 6 feet apart and structured so that guests sleep head to toe. Here is a resource that provides [bed positioning](#) guidance.

**Note: Are there any examples of communities that use CES for emergency shelter and/or have an informal network of shelters that call one another if they are at capacity for the night? We want to minimize the shelters a person needs to physically go to before finding a bed.*

4. Allow clients to store belongings at the shelter

Moving personal belongings frequently is a consequence of housing instability that can cause stress and trauma for individuals experiencing homelessness. Storage facilities that are safe and secure minimize the danger of important items being lost, stolen, or thrown away. Shelters that offer storage facilities onsite can provide guests peace of mind that their property will be safe and secure, and free up guests to move about without the stress of having to take their possessions with them whenever they move.

5. Provide housing navigation services at the shelter

Bringing services to guests embraces the client-centered approach and minimizes the risks associated with seeking out services in the community, which may force the use of public transportation and public buildings. (insert housing navigator resource)

Resources:

- [Disaster Response Rehousing – Emergency/Congregate Shelters](#)
- [Homeless Shelter Worker Training – CDC](#)

*Disclaimer: While this product is focused on protocol for winter shelter, it is applicable to other weather conditions, including hot weather and natural disasters.