

## LOCAL NEWS

# Lowell's adult homeless shelter at peak capacity

'The reality is that there isn't enough space,' providers say



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LOWELL — There are more homeless people than available beds in Lowell, leading to people in need of emergency shelter being turned away, said Isaiah Stephens, managing director of the Lowell Transitional Living Center on Middlesex Street.

"People are coming into the shelter faster than we can house them," Stephens told a group of service providers and advocates attending a remote meeting of [Solidarity Lowell on Jan. 28](#).

Solidarity Lowell is a volunteer group of community members of Greater Lowell working toward social justice in areas such as housing and homelessness.

In January, the city conducted its annual, federally mandated [point-in-time count](#) of the number of people experiencing homelessness, and found there are 189 sheltered and 97 unsheltered individuals in Lowell.

At the City Council's Feb. 6 meeting, councilors suggested that some people were unsheltered by choice and not due to a lack of shelter or motel beds.

"We have open beds that people aren't taking," Councilor Erik Gitschier said.

The bed-to-person ratio was just one of the many surprising data points to come out of the roundtable. Attendees heard about police agencies from as far away as Salisbury bringing unhoused people to Lowell's shelter, that more men than women need shelter and an almost doubling in attendance at the [Eliot Day Center](#), which provides both spiritual and practical support to its unhoused neighbors in the city.

"This time last year, our average daily attendance was around 70 people," the Rev. Heather Prince Doss said. "Now it's around 125 people a day."

The number of unhoused people who call Lowell home jumped by a [staggering 23% last year](#) based on figures released by city Director of Homeless Initiatives Maura Fitzpatrick

The outreach mission on Summer Street, across from South Common Park, opens its doors at 8 a.m. The program offers a safe place for people who are homeless to escape the weather and the streets, to grab breakfast and lunch, or as a stop in their day for a cup of coffee, companionship or solitude. St. Paul's Soup Kitchen takes over at 2:30 p.m. until the evening, with dinner at 5 p.m. The Day Center is not open on the weekends.

"The reality is that there isn't enough space," Doss said. "The shelter and the hotels tend to be at capacity every night."

[LTLC](#) is a client-centered emergency shelter that has provided shelter and care to adults for 35 years. It was founded as the Middlesex Shelter in 1986 in response to the number of homeless individuals living on the streets of Lowell, and is now the largest homeless shelter and support organization north of Boston with 90 beds and an extra 70 emergency beds in winter.

Stephens said the shelter offers case-management and harm-reduction services, addiction counseling, HIV testing, health care and resident meals for the homeless population.

"When I first started at LTLC about six years ago, we were a sober/dry shelter," he said. "But for the past four years we've been operating as a wet shelter because sobriety shouldn't be a barrier to housing someone."

That open-door mission is being strained by the crushing need for affordable and low-income housing in the city that Stephens said is causing people to “fall into homelessness.”

“It really is a [public health crisis](#),” he said.

Even under the [winter protocol program](#), which funds additional shelter and hotel beds from November through March, Stephens said the LTLC staff nightly turn away men looking to get off the streets and into a warm bed.

“We cap out for the men every night,” Stephens said. “We haven’t hit max capacity with the women, yet.”

The lack of available or affordable housing is a regionwide issue, but it is being felt most acutely in Lowell.

Although many communities have unhoused people, not all communities provide services for that demographic. Instead, each town has an agreement with the South Middlesex Opportunity Council, the [operator of the LTLC](#).

“Police drop off people every night at the shelter from other communities,” Stephens said.

At the same time, larger communities like Lawrence and Haverhill are also under-resourced to meet the demand and send their homeless to the LTLC.

Lawrence’s Daybreak Shelter has about 20 beds for a city of almost 89,000. In Haverhill, with a population of 67,000, Mitch’s Place has enough beds for 30 people — even during winter protocol.

“It’s frustrating because we don’t have enough beds for people in our own city, and now we’re helping other communities as well,” Stephens said.

Daniel O’Connor is the chair of Lowell’s [Hunger and Homeless Commission](#), and also a board president with House of Hope, a nonprofit that helps homeless families. He noted that sheltering capacity in Lowell’s surrounding towns is low.

“We have over 200 beds compared to 26 beds in these other cities,” he said. “I don’t understand why the sheltering is so low in these cities.”

Massachusetts has two distinct homeless systems: one for families and one for adults.

“The emergency assistance family shelter system is at capacity for 7,500 families,” O’Connor said. “There are 600 families on the waiting list for shelter beds.”

As both the adult and family homeless crisis rages on, Stephens said the need even exceeds the available manpower to staff the facility.

“We do not have enough staff,” he said. “Staffing is a big, big problem in human service work. Our field is criminally underpaid and the job is very, very hard. People aren’t knocking down the door to work in the shelter.”

He asked the public’s [help in donations](#) such as handwarmers, gloves, hats and socks.

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“Anything that will keep people warm,” Stephens said.

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