



Warming Centers and Surviving the Dangers of Being Unhoused December 2023

As this year ends and temperatures begin to dip below freezing, we must not lose sight of the needs of our unhoused community. Even for folx with housing, Midwest winters are harsh. Low temperatures in the teens and negative wind chills are common. The average low temperatures in Douglas, Sarpy, and Pottawattamie counties from December to February range from 15-19 degrees. All three months receive an average of at least six inches of snowfall. It's impossible to avoid the fact that, in these conditions, unsheltered people will die.

In an ideal world, the established systems would be able to at least provide temporary shelter during this time. Unfortunately, we are still far from living in that ideal world and our compassion must extend beyond our own sight—which should include checking on folx outside and helping facilitate emergency care.

The most immediate danger from living unsheltered is hypothermia. When exposed to cold temperatures, your body loses heat faster than it can produce more. Extended exposure eventually uses up your body's stored energy, leading to a lower body temperature.

When body temperature is too low it affects the brain, making it difficult to think clearly or move well. This makes hypothermia especially lethal, because a person may not know that it's occurring and may not be able to do anything to prevent it.

Hypothermia may be accompanied by the following symptoms:

- Shivering
- Exhaustion
- Confusion
- Fumbling hands
- Memory loss
- Slurred speech
- Drowsiness

If you see somebody suffering from these signs, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends taking the person's temperature if possible. If their temperature is below 95°F or you are unable to take their temperature, call for medical attention immediately.

If you are not able to get medical help right away, take the following steps to warm the person up and potentially save their life:

- Move the person into a warm building.
- Remove any wet layers of outerwear.
- Warm the center of the person's body—chest, neck, head—using an electric blanket, if possible.
- Encourage warm drinks (non-alcoholic) to help increase body temperature.
- Keep the person dry and wrap them in a warm blanket after body temperature increases.

For our friends and neighbors currently living unhoused, the National Health Care for the Homeless Council (NHCHC) suggests following these tips to help keep you safe and warm:

- Find a place to sleep that is out of the wind.
- Wear as much clothing as possible, especially around your core (stomach, back, and chest).
- Make sure your clothing is loose.
- Put something under your sleeping bag to prevent ground moisture from seeping in.
- If your sleeping bag is too big, fill up empty space with extra clothes or newspaper.
- Keep your face outside your sleeping bag so that the moisture from your breathing does not get into the bag. Wear a warm hat and scarf to keep your head and neck warm.
- Avoid drinking a lot of fluid at night, so you won't have to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night.
- If you can, eat a big dinner with lots of calories. Calories are a unit of heat.
- Keep a snack with you for the middle of the night, so if you do wake up cold, you can replace lost calories.
- Don't drink alcohol. Alcohol slows down your circulation and can cause you to lose body heat, especially in your hands and feet.

Especially during this time when exposure could lead to death, we cannot treat homelessness as a personal failing or blame the unhoused for their circumstances. While we certainly don't want to encourage homelessness, we absolutely do not want to criminalize it either. With this in mind, MACCH is committed to connecting folx to providers that can offer help and housing support as well as proactively sharing opportunities that will help save lives.

To prevent exposure to dangerous conditions and loss of life, several of our community partners host warming centers across the metro area during our region's coldest months. Each facility has its own requirements, services, and daily capacities so we recommend staying tuned to each organization's social media channels for information and updates.

Warming Centers:

Salvation Army will host warming centers from 9 AM to 4:30 PM on weekdays (Monday-Friday) when a weather advisory is in effect. The following locations will have a place to warm up, water, and food at certain locations, when possible.

Kroc Center
2825 Y Street
Omaha, NE 68107
402-898-7700

Omaha North
2424 Pratt Street
Omaha, NE 68111
402-898-7700

Omaha Citadel
3738 Cuming Street
Omaha, NE 68131
402-898-7700

Youth Emergency Services (YES) hosts a warming center during the months of December through March at their downtown Outreach Center on weekdays (Monday-Friday) from 9 AM to 5 PM. While YES offers services to youth under the age of 25, all ages are welcome into their warming center and YES can connect you to resources for case management and housing. YES always offers a drink and meal to their guests.

YES Outreach Center
2602 Harney Street
Omaha, NE 68131
402-345-5187

New Visions Homeless Services will operate a warming center starting January 8, 2024 through March 29, 2024. The warming center will open from 9 AM to 4 PM, Monday through Friday and offer breakfast and lunch daily. New Visions Street Outreach team will be there to offer support and case management services. There are no entry or eligibility requirements.

New Visions Warming Center
1607 Avenue I
Council Bluffs, IA 51501
712-307-0889

Open Door Mission hosts a warming center on days when the temperature is below freezing (32° F). Men, women, and families are welcome to their space without residing in the center itself. Lunch and dinner will be available to guests at 12 PM and 6 PM, respectively. All guests will also have access to any Open Door Mission partner agencies on site.

Open Door Mission
2705 N. 20th Street East
Omaha, NE 68110
402-422-1111

Siena Francis House has a warming center that is open 7 days a week, as long as there is a winter weather advisory in effect or temperature is below 20 degrees. Individuals 19 and older are welcome to this warming center from 9 AM to 4 PM, but may be able to check into the shelter and stay longer. Siena Francis House will provide lunch to all guests, as well as case management and material assistance services in some cases.

Siena Francis House
1117 N. 17th Street
Omaha, Nebraska 68102
402-341-1821

Sources:

<https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/winter/staysafe/hypothermia.html>

<https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2022/what-is-harm-reduction>

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/07/homelessness-is-lethal-deaths-have-risen-dramatically>

https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Extreme_ColdV31.pdf?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=those%20living%20outside&utm_campaign=UA-179397308-1

<https://rittercenter.org/news/national-homeless-persons-memorial-day-2022/#:~:text=December%2021st%20is%20National%20Homeless%20Persons%27%20Memorial%20Day.>