

# Preventing COVID-19 in Chicago's Homeless Population

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## Background

Protecting the most vulnerable Chicagoans – particularly people experiencing homelessness – is a top priority in the City's response to COVID-19. Because the coronavirus spreads rapidly among close contacts, people living in congregate settings are at particularly high risk. Individuals experiencing homelessness cannot simply close their doors to the virus. Implementing a city-wide system to prevent transmission of COVID-19 within shelters and encampments has required an unprecedented mobilization of the City's workforce and collaboration with medical providers, shelter operators, academic centers and advocacy organizations. Our strategy is guided by three components:

1. **Prevention:** Take steps to stop or slow the spread of COVID-19 in congregate shelters and encampments.
2. **Response:** Identify confirmed cases and provide safe places where people can recover from illness.
3. **Recover:** Use the moment of COVID-19 to bring lasting, sustainable improvements to the services available for people experiencing homelessness.

Much of the success to date is thanks to our extraordinary partners, who have taken a leading role to help us understand current conditions and respond to evolving needs.

## Preventing the Spread of COVID-19

- DFSS, in partnership with the Chicago Park District, Chicago Public Schools, YMCA of Metro Chicago and Salvation Army, and delegate agency partners **opened temporary shelters** with a total of 699 beds – including facilities dedicated to women and children – to decompress congregate settings and allow for appropriate social distancing.
- CDPH **issued guidance documents and screening tools** for staff working in congregate settings and outreach workers working in encampment settings. CDPH and DFSS conducted weekly webinars to train providers and answer questions on implementing the guidance.
- CDPH **mobilized medical professionals** to assist shelters and outreach workers with symptom screening and advise them on what to do if staff or residents get sick. Medical staff have visited the 50 most-congregate shelters in the city to provide in-person education.
- CDPH is **building a network** of providers to care for people experiencing homelessness that will extend beyond our COVID-19 response.
- To prevent spread in encampments, DFSS' Homeless Outreach Prevention team and delegate agency partners regularly **visit encampments to assess** safety and nutritional needs, conduct symptom screenings, identify locations that require cleaning, and respond to requests for shelter. DFSS has also **installed 12 portable washrooms and hand-washing stations** at encampments with more than 10 residents.
- The City and Lawndale Christian Health Center are providing **housing for people at high risk** to protect them from getting COVID-19. To date, 257 people over the age of 60 and/or who have underlying medical conditions have been moved out of congregate settings into individual rooms with supportive services so they have a safe place to stay for as long as there is evidence of community spread within shelters.

## Identifying and Responding to COVID-19 Cases

- Despite these efforts, every day that passes, people living in congregate settings are at risk of exposure. CDPH **supports rapid diagnostic testing** of people living in shelters and encampments through the provision of rapid testing machines to the largest shelters, and during encampment outreach. CDPH and DFSS have also partnered with Lawndale Christian Health Center to expand rapid diagnostic testing to all shelters across the city.
- CDPH **investigates all cases** of COVID-19 within congregate settings. When cases occur, CDPH provides tailored guidance to facility staff on infection control, including cleaning protocols and how to properly manage both COVID-19 positive and exposed individuals.
- Through a partnership with University of Illinois Health and Rush University Medical Center, CDPH has **performed thousands of tests** in homeless shelters and encampments.
- Rapid isolation of people with COVID-19 is necessary to control outbreaks in shelters and encampments. Through partnerships with A Safe Haven, Rush University Medical Center, YMCA of Metro Chicago and Cook County Health, CDPH opened **two isolation facilities with wrap around services** for individuals who require additional support for mental health and substance use needs, in addition to other hotel-based isolation facilities to people experiencing homelessness who do not require this level of care.
- CDPH **supports shelter staff** by deploying nurses to provide medical care in those shelters providing on-site isolation for COVID-19 cases. CDPH nurses now visit every shelter and encampment with COVID-19 cases to provide results and referral to safe isolation.

## Need for Systemic Change

A public health emergency like COVID-19 magnifies what we already knew: that health requires a home, and the holes in our social safety net have real impact on health outcomes. The COVID-19 response has driven considerable innovation, producing new partnerships and housing models that can inform how we support people experiencing homelessness, long after the immediate threat of coronavirus is behind us.

In the City of Chicago, individuals and households experiencing homelessness are matched to housing resources through a single Coordinated Entry System, which works to distribute limited housing resources to the most vulnerable. With CDPH's guidance the Coordinated Entry Leadership Team adopted a temporary prioritization plan in response to COVID-19 on April 28th, 2020. This temporary change **prioritizes households at high-risk for serious illness due to COVID-19 for housing programs**. In June 2020, the City allocated \$17.6M in Emergency Solutions Grant **CARES Act funding to support housing 1,250 households** through the Expedited Housing Initiative (EHI), developed in collaboration with the All Chicago and the Chicago Continuum of Care. EHI utilizes **housing as an effective public health intervention** to ensure homeless Chicagoans at high risk of serious illness due to COVID-19 can maintain their health in their own home.

Additionally, as part of its COVID-19 response, the City of Chicago allocated an additional \$1.2 million to funding Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) services and Community Support Teams (CST), with a focus on serving Chicago's South and West Sides. The City is partnering with leading community mental health organizations in this **expansion of intensive community-based services for persons living with serious mental illness**. These increased services will support individuals living with serious mental illness who are attaining housing through increased rapid rehousing capacity and changes in permanent housing priorities, among other vulnerable people, and promote their successful long-term maintenance of their housing.