



CITY OF CHICAGO • OFFICE OF THE MAYOR



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**CONTACT:**

Mayor's Press Office

312.744.3334

[press@cityofchicago.org](mailto:press@cityofchicago.org)

**MAYOR LIGHTFOOT JOINS CITY OFFICIALS AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS  
TO SUPPORT INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS AMID COVID-19**

*Expansion in healthcare, testing, housing and wraparound services to enhance  
protection of the most vulnerable Chicagoans*

**CHICAGO** – Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot today joined Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) Commissioner Dr. Allison Arwady, Chicago Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS) Commissioner Lisa Morrison Butler and a number of community organization leaders to announce the implementation and mobilization of a citywide system to prevent transmission and respond to cases of COVID-19 among individuals experiencing homelessness.

“Unlike many of us, our residents experiencing homelessness cannot simply close their doors to this disease, and that’s why we have we have rapidly escalated our citywide system to prevent transmission of this disease within shelters and encampments, and ultimately save lives,” said Mayor Lightfoot. “Though no one is immune to COVID-19, this pandemic has all too clearly revealed the chasms in our society and serves as a wake-up call on the life-and-death urgency of closing the gaps in equity and opportunity now, and in the months and years to come.”

“The success of this effort is rooted in partnerships across non-profit, healthcare, and advocacy organizations. It’s so important that we focus on congregate settings and direct resources to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among this population, doubly so because this is also a group where under-lying health conditions are often a concern,” said CDPH Commissioner Allison Arwady, MD, MPH. “This kind of rapid, citywide response is only possible because so many organizations have come together with a shared commitment to protecting Chicago’s homeless population.”

To meet the immediate needs of shelter staff and residents on the front lines, CDPH has arranged for nurse visits at all shelters across the city to provide in-person education and screenings. Additionally, CDPH will pair community-based providers with local shelters for ongoing clinical support – building a new network of care for the homeless that will extend beyond this outbreak. CDPH and medical student



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volunteers from Rush University Medical Center have also distributed more than 25,000 pieces of personal protective equipment (PPE) donated by Project HOPE to shelter residents and staff, as well as DFSS outreach teams.

Containment strategies depend on the ability to rapidly identify and address cases in congregate settings. With support and leadership from the University of Illinois Health and Rush University Medical Center, more than 700 shelter residents and staff can now be tested for COVID-19 each week. This expansion of testing capability will allow CDPH to intervene and halt further spread within congregate settings.

For most people who get COVID-19, symptoms are mild and can be managed outside of the hospital. However, cases tend to be more severe in people over the age of 60 and/or who have underlying medical conditions. The City is shielding its most vulnerable shelter residents from exposure to COVID-19 by providing temporary housing in individual rooms with supportive services. Through a partnership with Lawndale Christian Health Center, the City has moved nearly 100 high-risk residents out of congregate settings to date – with more to be placed in the days ahead.

“The current COVID-19 pandemic, like the opioid overdose epidemic, has accentuated the need for supportive housing to improve the health of those experiencing homelessness,” said Thomas D. Huggett, MD, MPH, Family Physician and Medical Director-Mobile Health at Lawndale Christian Health Center, who has provided primary care in West Side shelters for the last 24 years. “We have patients asking for cleaning supplies to clean their own rooms, while they make significant progress with their medical and even mental health issues. Our model contributes more evidence that people experiencing homelessness, like any of us, do better when they have safe, supported housing.”

Many of the individuals experiencing homelessness who test positive for COVID-19 also require support for mental health and substance use needs. To ensure safe places for people to recover, the City – together with A Safe Haven, Rush University Medical Center and Heartland Alliance – recently opened a 100-bed isolation facility with wraparound services.

“At A Safe Haven we are humbled and honored to be a part of a team working on behalf of our most vulnerable neighbors,” said Neli Vazquez Rowland, President and Co-Founder, A Safe Haven (ASH). “To serve people with nowhere else to turn, the ASH Isolation Space is staffed with a multi-disciplinary team of professionals that can deliver medical and behavioral healthcare for people diagnosed with COVID-19. This innovative and integrated approach will ensure that our guests get the



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wraparound support they need to overcome COVID-19 in a setting that is conducive to helping them make a full recovery."

In addition to these steps, over the last several weeks DFSS has implemented various measures to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 among individuals experiencing homelessness. In partnership with the YMCA of Metro Chicago and the Salvation Army, DFSS opened temporary shelter sites with a total of 699 beds – including facilities dedicated to women and children, as well as residents returning from Cook County Jail – to decompress congregate settings and allow for appropriate social distancing.

To support people living in encampments, the DFSS Homeless Outreach Prevention team regularly visits encampments across the city to assess safety and nutritional needs, 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 people.

"As the situation on the ground evolves, so do the needs of residents experiencing homelessness," said DFSS Commissioner Lisa Morrison Butler. "From the start of this situation, the wellbeing of residents in shelters and encampments has been a top priority at DFSS. We have rapidly adjusted strategies to limit gaps in services and made real-time decisions to ensure vulnerable populations in Chicago have access to every resource available for them to stay healthy."

Despite the immense preventative measures in place, people living in congregate settings are at increased risk of exposure. The City and its vast array of partners will continue to provide education and resources, identify and respond to cases as they occur, and work to ensure an equitable, compassionate response to COVID-19 in Chicago's homeless population.

For more information and updates on COVID-19, text COVID19 to 78015, email [coronavirus@chicago.gov](mailto:coronavirus@chicago.gov) or visit [chicago.gov/coronavirus](http://chicago.gov/coronavirus).

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