

The Winter Shelter concludes a successful season

For the first time, the Winter Shelter for individuals who are experiencing homelessness, formerly known as the Severe Weather Emergency Shelter, was open every night throughout the winter, regardless of weather. The shelter is a partnership between Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) and Pittsburgh Mercy's Operation Safety Net®.

Between November 15, 2016, and March 15, 2017, individuals could stay at the shelter daily from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. Previously, the shelter opened only on nights that were 25°F or below, when the windchill factor was below 15°F, or when there was a 50 percent or greater chance of freezing precipitation.

"Last winter, the shelter was open 46 nights, serving 499 individuals," stated Brian Matous, Winter Shelter team leader for Pittsburgh Mercy's Operation Safety Net. "This winter, we were able to assist 1,138 individuals at the shelter – 913 men and 225 women. We would not have been able to provide support for so many people without the help of partner organizations and donors."

Shelter participants received overnight accommodations, a hot meal, a shower, winter clothing, access to health and human services, as well as assistance with applications to housing and other vital benefit programs. Additionally, representatives from the Allegheny Link were available at the shelter several nights each week to offer information, referrals, counseling, application assistance, service coordination and follow-up services to eligible participants.

"Imagine interviewing for a job with everything you own in the waiting room or living under a bridge or in a tent with no way to communicate with the all too busy world around you. Being open every day has given us the framework to provide some consistency as we work with those experiencing homelessness. Knowing that you will have a place to lay your head allowed us to start at the next level of support and services," Brian continued.

Organizers are evaluating the program and will begin planning for the next Winter Shelter in the coming months.