1. **Overview – Emergency Weather shelters/programs**

Emergency Weather shelters are community shelters designated as an indoor location where people can go when the weather is dangerously cold (or hot). Hypothermia kills an estimated 700 people experiencing, or at-risk of homelessness each year. (National Coalition for the Homeless). Every day, outreach workers in cities across the nation go out into communities to encourage people on the street to take shelter, but many homeless people refuse. Trauma, along with shelter barriers and entry requirements make it difficult for some persons experiencing homelessness to feel safe in traditional shelters. Emergency weather shelters are a bridge to the shelter and housing system by providing safety during inclement weather for persons living on the streets until they can be appropriately housed. Emergency shelters are generally “activated” by emergency responders or designated community leaders during extreme weather conditions.

An emergency weather shelter can operate only during the day, only at night, or can provide 24 hour shelter during extreme weather conditions. Day shelters are often designated public places, including libraries, senior centers, and other locations where people gather during the day. (weblink to MO warming shelters on DSS website). Night shelters are often housed in churches or designated public buildings and operate only during extreme weather conditions. In some communities, existing homeless shelters expand their capacity to allow for “overflow” during certain times of year, or during extreme weather conditions. These shelters may be able to accomodate people for 24 hours during times of activation.

Emergency, or low-barrier shelters **are designed to keep people safe from extreme weather conditions. The Emergency Shelter overnight programs provide beds on a first come, first served basis, to any homeless person**. “Low-barrier” shelters are those that do not have a lot of requirements to get in. **People can come in, even if they don’t have identification, cannot pass a background check, they're inebriated or using substances or have a mental illness as long as they're not of harm to themselves or to others. Emergency, low barrier shelters are used to prevent death** among persons who have inadequate shelter and/or health conditions that make them especially vulnerable to extreme weather.

Emergency weather shelters are as varied as the communities they serve. What is offered in each community with emergency weather shelters depends on the population and needs of community residents. Some communities have few literally homeless persons, but have persons with inadequate shelter insulation, cooling, or heat to stay safe during extreme weather. Other communities have large populations of homeless. Some communities have people living in unsafe conditions where individuals in the household may prefer staying on the streets rather than feeling unsafe in the housing available to them. Emergency weather programs are not a “one size fits all”. What they share in common, is a community commitment to help their most vulnerable residents stay safe during extreme weather conditions.

- Web links to sample or model programs, other weblinks

1. **Developing an emergency weather response program**
2. **Assembling a Leadership Team**

Developing an emergency weather response program can begin with 2-5 individuals with the passion to prevent death among their most fragile community residents during extreme weather conditions. It is helpful to have at least one person on the initial planning team with the organizational skills to help the group to schedule regular meetings, develop agendas, and keep the group on task. Having a person with strong communication skills and/or knowledge of the community and current homeless service system is also an asset to the team. Communication with other community stakeholders becomes essential as planning develops and others are needed to assist with the project. Consider church leaders, municipal leaders, funders, first responders, organizations active in disaster relief, or others as you begin to plan a community emergency weather response team. Ask for an initial commitment of 3-6 meetings to help develop an initial plan and recruit others involvement in the program.

**b) Initial Planning**

It is helpful to start the planning process a few months prior to anticipated extreme weather and to focus initial planning around death prevention during emergency weather conditions, This allows initial stakeholders to gather basic community information and determine the level of need for a solution. The leadership team could explore basic questions such as:

* Who in our community is most vulnerable during extreme weather conditions?
* Does our community have anything currently in place to reach out and assure their safety during extreme weather?
* Who in our community struggles with safe housing with adequate heating and/or cooling?
* How large is our population of unsheltered homeless persons?

Seeking answers to the above questions will help identify the population needing an emergency weather response program as well as identify potential partners to help with information and planning.

As vulnerable populations and level of need is identified, the committee can begin exploring what community supports may be available to launch and operate an emergency weather program. Initial resources may include volunteers, funding, facilities, or other resources. At this stage, it is important to be open to what type of initial program can be developed that is doable, given initial resources available. It is better to start small, and build community engagement rather than create a large program that is not needed or is unsustainable! An initial program may be as simple as a program to check in on elderly residents during extreme weather, or advertising a community location where people can come during the day if they need safe accommodations.

If a decision is made to create an overnight emergency shelter response, additional planning questions will need to be addressed, including:

* Who will be served?
* Community support that may be available
* Availability of volunteers
* Transportation options
* Operating funds that may be available/applied for
* This is a great time to reach out and expand the planning team to engage others in developing the program!

**c) Exploring Location Options**

Communities across the state utilize a variety of location options for emergency weather shelters. Ideas include motel rooms, a single site, or sites that rotate throughout the season. In this case, communities may have an emergency weather van that transports items (cots, equipment, etc.) to the next location. Many communities utilize faith based partners to host shelters.

There are pros and cons to each type of shelter- it is important to think about what resources your community needs compared to what resources are readily available, the physical location of potential sites compared with where guests would be coming from, any city ordinances that may impact the creation of an emergency weather shelter system, and the staffing needs that sites would require.

There are several minimum standards to think about when considering a location:

* Does the location have adequate restrooms?
* Does the location have storage for cots or other supplies?
* How many guests can the facility safely accommodate - make sure to check city codes for this.
* If you want to offer food, is there space for this?
* Safety considerations- fire exits, accessibility, clear traffic flow, building access.
  + Is there a need for safety/fire inspections or permits?
  + If so, who is responsible for obtaining these?
* Does the location require a signed agreement/MOA or liability insurance?

**d) Program Activation Considerations**

Program activation varies across communities based on local need and capacity to meet that need. It is important to understand local needs and capacity and to think through how the shelter will be activated well in advance of the open season, so that the process can be objective and shared with the broader community. There are several factors to consider regarding activation:

* When will the program be active - winter, summer, both? What will start/end dates be?
* Who will determine if program is open?
* Will activation be based on a temperature rating, wind chill, snow/rain?
  + Will the same weather service be utilized to gauge this? Objective reasoning is important!
* How will openings be communicated? (See next section)
* What times will shelters be open? Will open/close times impact the neighborhood where the shelter is located?
  + For example, one community’s crisis cold weather shelter is located across the street from an elementary school. To accomodate the needs of the school, the shelter opens late in the evening (9:00 pm) and ensure that all guests are off the property by 7:00 a.m. the next day.

If there are multiple shelters in operation and/or shelters for different populations, it is extremely helpful if the shelters adopt the same criteria for opening.

Regardless of when and how the emergency weather system is activated, it is important that consistent communication methods (when activiation it announced, how that information is shared, contact number etc.) are utilized.

**3. Marketing and Communications**

Effective promotion of an emergency shelter system is key to making sure vulnerable populations and the agencies/organizations that serve them are aware of the program, as well as potential supporters. It is recommended that the planning committee have plans to outreach to the following entities:

* Advocacy groups
* Meal sites
* Local coordinated entry system and direct service agencies
* First responders and emergency rooms
* Media
* City government
* Transit system

In addition to promoting that the shelter system exists to stakeholders, it is also important to have a plan for consistent communication about when emergency weather shelters are open, transportation options for the shelters, and any requirements for accessing the shelters. Ideas on how to share this information include social media (make sure to share the open date in posts), a hotline/Google phone number, email blasts, news releases. Printing a simple business card with a key phone number can also be very effective, as it can be given directly to persons experiencing homelessness at feeding programs, shelters, or by emergency responders. If there are multiple emergency weather shelters in the community (ie one shelter for women and a separate one for men) it is helpful if shared communication methods can be used to announce openings and/or if there is one central location (ie website) that lists all information for available shelters in the community. As the planning committee, you are probably immersed in this process. However, try to step out of that box and think about where someone who is not familiar with this system of care would go to find information about shelters.

Items to consider emphasizing with general marketing about the importance of emergency weather shelters are:

* emergency weather shelters prevent deaths
* impacts of hypothermia/heat stroke
* benefits of a low barrier shelter

The planning committee should also have a process in place to communicate openings to the shelter and to volunteers.

Sample marketing materials are available at the weblinks below:

Add web links here

**5. Policies and Procedures**

When overnight or day shelters are part of a community response to emergency weather, it is helpful to develop a short manual and/or checklists outlining what is expected of staff and/or volunteers. Having a manual and/or checklists help with retention of staff and/or volunteers, since expectations are clear.

Volunteers to not need to spend an inordinate amount of time developing a manual. Sample shelter manuals are available on-line, or at web links below, and can be edited with information for your community. A shelter manual should contain, at minimum, the following information:

* Hours of operation
* When does staff need to arrive?
* Who sets up cots?
* Transportation plan, if it exists
* When do clients arrive? Can clients arrive early?
* What is the minimum staffing needed?
* How are emergencies handled?
* How are clients admitted to the facility? What is the process upon arrival?
* When can clients be turned away?
* Minimal rules, and process if guests violate the rules
* Process for expenditures
* What time do clients need to exit the facility?
* Is transportation provided? If so, how is it arranged?
* What is the process for closing the facility each day?
* Process for client follow-up

Sample manuals are available at the weblinks below:

Add web links here

In addition, it is helpful to have basic forms to collect information needed for record keeping. If a shelter program is receiving operating funding, generally some record keeping and reporting is required. Clarifying what information or record keeping is needed to report to funders and/or the community will help insure that staff and/or volunteers are collecting the right information. Most programs, at minimum, keep a list of the days the program is operational, along with a number of participants and/or participant names. In addition, programs often want to track volunteers and the hours they served. Consider the following forms:

* Client form/sign in
* Volunteer form/sign-in

Web links to other sample forms are below.

Add web links here.

**6. Staffing and Training**

A more structured emergency weather response program or shelter in your community requires your leadership team to consider staffing and training issues:

* Will the program be staffed with volunteers or paid staff?
* Who will supervise the program?
* Who will be responsible for staff and guests each night (or day) the shelter is open?
* Who will manage the facility(s), including giving access to staff and/or volunteers?

It is helpful to consider general roles and responsibilities of staff and volunteers. Developing job descriptions can help clarify roles, and help with recruiting appropriate staff and/or volunteers. Clarifying expectations of staff and volunteers at the beginning of a program helps avoid miscommunication and misunderstandings later. Consider the following issues when planning for staff/volunteer recruitment and training:

* Develop job descriptions and staff/volunteer recruitment plan
* Who will train staff? How and where will training be held?
* What needs to be included in the training? It is helpful to have some training

around low barrier shelter –how to screen people in, and not out

* How should disruptive clients be handled?

Once again, many successful weather response programs are in operation around the country, and there is not a need to start from scratch when developing a staffing and training plan. See the web links below to help you get started in accessing information for staffing and training:

Add weblinks here for sample job descriptions and/or training materials

**8. Transportation & Pets**

Many person needing emergency weather shelter also lack transportation. As a result, transportation is an important consideration in planning your program. In urban areas, buses or vans may be able to pick up persons needing shelter from designated locations. In more suburban or rural areas, transportation becomes a bigger barrier to accessing shelter. Consider the following issues:

* Will transportation be available to/from the weather shelter?
* If so, how will it be provided?
* Is there the possibility of partnering with a local transit system or rides program?
* Is it possible to locate the shelter(s) in areas that are more accessible?
* If transportation is provided, how will clients access the transportation?

Communities are very creative in helping persons need shelter to overcome transportation barriers. Depending on the community, bus passes, church vans, volunteer transportation, emergency response personnel, and Cab rides have all been used to help overcome transportation barriers.

Some persons experiencing a housing crisis also have pets. Pets may be companion animals or service animals. Before opening a shelter program, it is helpful to think about the needs of persons needing shelter who also have pets, and determine if there is a way to accommodate pets either at the shelter or in a separate location. Some shelters accomodate pets, while others provide no shelter or off site shelter for pets. If your shelter will accomodate pets, it is helpful to have a pet policy to clarify:

* If pets will be accommodated, and what type (dogs, cats, etc.)
* If pets are accommodated, what are shelter rules for the pets?  Clarify participant responsibilities for caring for their pets
* Decide if crates will be provided
* Are pets required to be current on their shots? If so, how will you verify this?

See web link below for sample shelter pet policy:

Add web link(s) here

**9. Engaging and Retaining Stakeholders**

It is always a challenge to engage and retain community stakeholders as you launch your program. At the end of the weather season, your challenge is to celebrate your successes, evaluate your program, and plan for the next weather season. It is normal for the first several years of any program to be less than successful. Beginning a program is the hardest step!

Clear, open communication is key for engaging and retaining stakeholders. Create a group open to continuous feedback and learning. It is fine to start small, and grow your program over time, as you are able to engage more stakeholders in your efforts. Success breeds success. After you have launched a program, you will have a lot more information about the needs of persons in need of emergency weather shelter in your community. Use the new information to plan improvements for the next weather season.

As part of your evaluation and planning process for next season, consider the following:

* Identify needs, and reach out to people who can help
* Allow leaders to emerge – delegate tasks!
* Keep meetings focused with clear goals and decisions to be made
* Develop a communication list with emails, phone numbers to keep everyone informed
* Clarify who is doing what, and communication deadlines for completing tasks, to keep everyone up to date on planning and what help is still needed
* Report progress and results. Celebrate success!
* Develop a wish list of supplies needed
* Develop volunteer job descriptions so people understand their commitment
* Consider end of season celebration/debrief to share results & thank volunteers