

COVID-19 and Homelessness

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COVID-19

COVID is a strain of coronavirus that has rapidly spread throughout the entire world. This virus affects the respiratory system and can present a growing list of symptoms, but the most common include cough and fever. The spread of this virus originated in China, but quickly spread to every country. In March 2020, an official declaration of a pandemic was made by government and health officials monitoring the situation. The current number of recorded cases worldwide is 3.14 million and within the United States alone there are 1.04 million reported cases (CDC.gov). New York is the most heavily affected state within the U.S. with 287,607 cases reported and 19,000 deaths whereas Texas has 25,000 reported cases to date (CDC.gov). There is currently no vaccine available which makes the easy spread of the virus a main concern of officials. Anyone is susceptible to the coronavirus; however, vulnerable populations are at increased risk.

One population that is especially vulnerable during this time are individuals experiencing homelessness. Homelessness includes individuals who are staying in shelters, sleeping in their cars or unsheltered homeless which reside outside for extended periods of time. This population includes people of all ages and backgrounds that are living in these conditions. The government has implemented shelter in place orders and distancing practices, but for this population these practices are not really an option. There is no way to safely shelter in place when individuals do not even have a place to seek shelter and for those in shelters keeping 6 feet from the hundreds of others there, is nearly impossible. In addition, there is very limited access to resources to keep individuals healthy such as frequent handwashing and sanitary

conditions. Instead, this population is exposed to overcrowding in shelters and possibly unsanitary conditions. Another important factor that puts this population at great risk is the prevalence of preexisting health conditions. The general health of individuals experiencing homelessness is substantially lower quality than the general population and the existence of an underlying condition makes an individual more susceptible to the negative effects of the virus (Black, 2020). A combination of preexisting health conditions, lack of access to sanitary living, and overcrowded shelters put individuals experiencing homelessness at risk during COVID-19.

In response to the current demands of the time, cities are responding in different ways to the needs of homeless individuals. In New York and California, governors have announced plans of housing a number of homeless individuals in hotel rooms across the city to allow for better living conditions and safety (Black,2020). In addition to efforts similar to these cities, there are other measures being taken. In Fort Worth, Texas, the main shelters that serve the city remain open, but are taking precautions. The Presbyterian Night Shelter and Salvation Army are still housing individuals, but have spread out the cots to adhere to the 6 feet rule. With these changes in place, there is less space to house individuals bringing their number of available beds down. In response to this, the Fort Worth Convention Center has opened up as a temporary overflow shelter. The Convention Center is housing approximately 400 individuals a night and serving individuals breakfast and dinner in the center (Fortworthtexas.gov). Interventions like these are eliminating some of the overcrowding in shelters that pose a substantial risk and is allowing for more sanitary conditions while sheltering in place. In addition, each day upon entering these facilities individuals are screened for the virus allowing for tracking of the virus and safe practices in the case of an infection.

References

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