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FEATURED

## Shelters get creative as pandemic lingers on

By Dustin Luca | Staff Writer

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Volunteers Dana DeCaro right, serves a piece of stuffed chicken breast on a tray while Jill Savitt prepares some vegetable at the Grace Center in Gloucester.

PAUL BILODEAU/Staff photo

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Local shelters are meeting the needs of homeless residents left out in the cold, but COVID-19 is forcing them to use their imaginations to figure out how to make it work amid the ongoing pandemic.

A cold snap Tuesday brought temperatures to single digits, with 4 degrees recorded in Beverly during the evening (and that's without the wind chill), according to historical data on the Weather Underground.

Shelters throughout the region scrambled to ensure their homeless communities were indoors.

"We're fine at the moment. We have everybody accounted for," said Jason Etheridge, executive director of Lifebridge in Salem and River House in Beverly. Lifebridge also operates The Grace Center in Gloucester, and Etheridge said the Cape Ann day shelter has been running in similar operation to the Salem day shelter.

"Right now, the challenge is that some of the places where people would normally go don't exist anymore," he said.

That's because the ongoing pandemic, which is entering its third year, presents new challenges each month. Shelters have had to significantly

reduce occupancy to ensure beds are socially distanced, and many places previously accessible to the homeless aren't like they were.

After all, it's a lot tougher to just hang out in a Dunkin' Donuts and warm up during a global pandemic, according to Etheridge.

But the issue hits harder on staffing, since the virus is spreading so fast now and continuing to break through among vaccinated populations. As a result, many organizations have workforces where staff come and go as the need to quarantine rises and falls, unpredictably.

"Omicron is probably where we saw the most infections, and it isn't an astronomical number. We've had five or six positives with clients. Keep in mind, we didn't have a positive in the first year of the pandemic. With delta, we had three or four," Etheridge said. "This version hit our employees pretty hard. There was one week where I watched eight employees test positive. That was a week and a half ago."

Over at Citizens Inn and Haven From Hunger in Peabody, executive director Corey Jackson has picked up some irregular duties, such as truck driver.

"This last wave has really impacted us a lot. We really didn't see much until this current surge — we're 20% down in staffing across the organization," Jackson said. "We had both truck drivers out from our food rescue. I was actually in a truck for two days last week doing all the food rescue."

The food rescue process involves drivers — not usually executive directors — hitting area supermarkets and bakeries to pick up food that's about to expire. The food is then considered "rescued" and helps feed those facing food insecurity, according to Jackson.

But Jackson wasn't frowning from inside the cab.

"I actually love it. It isn't the best use of my time, but it's a wonderful experience," he said. "It takes me out of the inbox and my email and gets me out on the road. I get to see supporters and donors, really great businesses that are doing a lot for our folks."

Their folks, meanwhile, were taken care of during this week's frigid temperatures. That's in part because of a shelter set up within Peabody supported by the city's Fire Department, according to Jackson. The location is protected to ensure it isn't overrun by people coming from outside of Peabody.

"Peabody has a collaboration between the Board of Health, Fire Department, Citizens Inn and a location I'm not allowed to disclose to get our participants out of the cold," Jackson said. "It's seen as a life-saving mission to make sure those folks have someplace to be overnight. That has been open last night (Monday) and will be open again tonight (Tuesday)."

Similarly, the state is still running a well-oiled process that has only improved with each passing month within the pandemic, according to Etheridge.

"The systems around us improved," he said. "Back in time, it was, 'Hey, how do we respond with the resources we have?' Now, the state has stood up quarantine sites in various hotels around the commonwealth. If we have a positive client, it's a call to what we call the 'Isolation Center.' They'll call, pick this individual up, and they'll stay there now for five days.

"We'll hold their bed until they complete their isolation and come back. We didn't have that option before," Etheridge continued. "It's certainly a process, but it's one we're accustomed to, and it allows us to focus on the other 40 people sleeping here."

The Open Door, which operates food pantries in Ipswich and Gloucester, and which serves as a community food resource center for low-income residents of Ipswich, Hamilton, Boxford, Topsfield, Wenham, Rowley, Gloucester, Rockport, Manchester, Essex, is also feeling the pinch of staff shortages.

"We have definitely felt the impact," said Julie LaFontaine, president and CEO of The Open Door. She said COVID-19-related staffing shortages have had the CEO and everyone else stepping up to fill the gaps, from packing and picking orders in the fulfillment center, to making home deliveries, restocking shelves or helping to prepare meals in the kitchen.

"All hands have been on deck," LaFontaine said.

In an email, LaFontaine said: "For the nearly 5,000 households that depend annually on The Open Door for food, we can't miss a single day of service. The latest variant challenges all the contingency plans we had previously put in place to keep our programs running and connect people to

good food.

“Omicron,” she added, “has sent us back to the drawing board to find the best solutions to serve people in the safest way possible. We are feeling the crunch of a workforce reduced by rise in COVID case counts at a time when people who are in isolation themselves or unable to work need us the most.”

Action Inc., a human service agency working in Ipswich, Gloucester, Essex, Mancheste, and Rockport, has not been immune to staffing issues related to the need to isolate or quarantine due to the latest surge of COVID-19 cases amid the appearance of the omicron variant.

As of Wednesday morning, Joe McEvoy, Action Inc.'s chief strategy officer, said 12 staffers were out, about 13% of the nonprofit's 90 staffers. The challenge for an agency that provides front-line services such as affordable housing, a homeless shelter, fuel assistance and energy conservation programs is one can't work remotely.

The agency's emergency shelter, which in pre-pandemic times had a capacity of 30 beds and was full each night, now has 16 due to COVID-19 safety precautions. McEvoy said Action Inc.'s director of housing services has had to take shifts at the shelter due to staff shortages.

“It's not an easy job,” McEvoy said of such work. “In the middle of the pandemic, it's a real tough job.”

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