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Manchester Shelter To Close Rather Than Admit People Who Are Drunk Or On Drugs



By **Jesse Leavenworth**

MANCHESTER — Rather than comply with a state directive to admit homeless people who are active alcohol- and drug-abusers, the organization that runs the local emergency shelter will close the 40-bed facility by July 1.

The board of directors of the Manchester Area Conference of Churches Charities decided recently to decline state money for the Main Street shelter, MACC Executive Director Beth Stafford said Wednesday.

Funding from the state Department of Housing — \$174,000 of the total \$330,000 shelter budget — would be contingent on the shelter's admitting people who are actively drinking and using drugs beginning with the next fiscal year, Stafford said.

A state official confirmed Wednesday that the contingency affects state funding contracts with emergency shelters statewide.

Other than in periods of extreme cold or heat, the longtime policy at the Manchester shelter has been to deny admission to people who are drinking and using drugs. MACC Charities and other "dry" shelters use Breathalyzer tests to screen people.

The organization lacks the staff and funding to supervise active alcohol- and drug-abusers overnight, Stafford said, and there are concerns about the safety of the two people — a staff member and a volunteer — who manage the place each night.

Also, MACC's mission is to help people get back on their feet, and mixing intoxicated and drug-addled clients with those who are seeking treatment and trying to change their lives would not work, she said.

"I feel like it's just warehousing people," Stafford said. "It's not helping. It's a tough population, anyway, because you can't make people do things."

The state's decision to halt alcohol and drug screening at shelters is in line with a successful U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development policy called "Housing First," said Steve DiLella, the state housing department's interim director of individual and family services. "Housing First is an approach to quickly and successfully connect individuals and families experiencing homelessness to permanent housing without preconditions and barriers to entry, such as sobriety, treatment or service participation requirements," according to a HUD brief.

Shelters should serve as gateways to treatment and permanent housing, and behavior should determine admission, not whether a person has had a drink or two, DiLella said. Homeless substance-abusers who remain on the streets end up costing taxpayers a lot of money, through emergency room treatment, incarceration and other services, DiLella said.

"We're trying to adjust the system to meet the needs of highly vulnerable individuals," he said. The state is not requiring shelters to admit anyone who is an obvious safety risk, DiLella said. However, in some cases, shelter staff have sent homeless people to the emergency room who were under the legal blood-alcohol limit to drive, he said.

"The state is doing the right thing," said Lisa Tepper Bates, executive director of the Hartford-based Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness.

Emergency shelters should serve people who need shelter, including those who have been drinking and using drugs, Bates said. She also said shelter staff should retain the ability not to admit anyone who is an obvious safety risk.

But "the best practice," Bates said, "is not to be punitive. When you bring people inside and house them, you provide a base where people can much more effectively address their problems. There's no evidence that you incentivize them by refusing them shelter."

There are 66 emergency shelters in the state, Bates said, and the majority accept people who may have been drinking or using drugs.

"The overwhelming majority understand the concept of 'Housing First' and embrace it," she said. Some of Manchester's chronic substance abusers have lived outdoors, most notably in a "tent city" off Broad Street. MACC outreach workers stay in touch with that population, offering treatment and other services, but some of the chronic homeless have refused to stop drinking and using illegal drugs.

The organization will have to get approval from the town's board of directors for any use besides an overnight shelter, town General Manager Scott Shanley said.

Stafford said several ideas are in the works and more discussions will be held about the future use of the facility. The goal, she said, is to work on MACC's core mission of serving people from Manchester and Bolton. The organization will continue to run its local food pantry and soup kitchen and other services, she said.