

Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter navigates pandemic times with supportive partnerships

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By Greg Levinsky

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WATERVILLE — St. Patrick’s Day. March 17, 2020. It’s the day that everything changed at the Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter.

The coronavirus pandemic had just taken its first foothold in central Maine, and Katie Spencer-White remembers that day’s happenings sharply. Emotions arose, from anxiety to fear and confusion.

“It was the day we literally evacuated half of our building,” said Spencer-White, the shelter’s executive director. “In those first panic-stricken days when we had no idea how fast the virus would spread or its severity, our staff was terrified.”

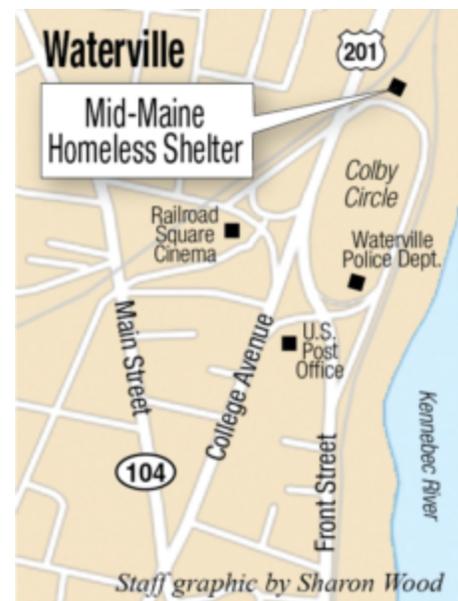
Shelter staff immediately took action in order to combat the pandemic while continuing to serve their constituents. Many of those who utilize the shelter have underlying health conditions, which can directly affect the severity of the virus if contracted.

The shelter has had just one case and it did not spread to anyone else.

The Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter faces unique challenges during the pandemic. Beyond the chronic shortage of available housing, the spacing required to defend against COVID-19 forced a diaspora of clients to hotels and accommodations as far away as Lewiston. It’s a 24/7, 365 days/year operation, yet for all of the experiences those involved with the shelter had, none prepared them for the past 10 months and counting.

The shelter, which gets half of its funding from Maine State Housing and the other half through donors and grants, serves 500 individuals a year. Some clients are single adults, but there are also families. About a quarter of those served are children under the age of 12. Even after former guests find housing, the shelter provides case management for up to a year to ensure housing stability.

Weathering the pandemic storm was not impossible, rather an exercise in perseverance and determination. Spencer-White noted when combating natural disasters like earthquakes, hurricanes and blizzards, people generally know what to do in the aftermath. But not so with a pandemic.



“We know that housing is a social determinant of health,” Spencer-White said. “We all know — viscerally — how necessary it is to have a safe, warm, and secure home during a public health crisis. A home is supposed to be a haven from an often heartless and unsafe world. Despite all of our fears and worries about funding and continuity of service, we’ve managed to navigate this slow rolling disaster without too much suffering. Even after things ‘return to normal,’ we’re only going to be stronger for what we’ve gone through together.”



Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter Executive Director Katie Spencer-White speaks about the Waterville shelter on Thursday. *Rich Abrahamson/Morning Sentinel* [Buy this Photo](#)

OFFERING SERVICES AT AN APPROPRIATE DISTANCE

If any phrase is synonymous with the pandemic, it may very well be “social distancing.” We all know it. We’ve been instructed to keep 6 feet apart to help prevent the spread of the virus.

Maintaining social distance is easier said than done for a facility that provides congregate care, distributes three meals a day and provides other support services.

The first challenge was simply stated yet entirely complex — how do we operate safely with little practical guidance? There’s no roadmap for an unprecedented situation like this, so there were no immediately accessible protocols for organizations.

David Sovetsky is program director and oversees the emergency shelter, case management and youth programs. He said the pandemic has been the greatest challenge of his 30-year career.

“It’s doing everything we can to mitigate the virus while providing the services that we can,” Sovetsky said.

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Walk both levels of the two-floor shelter and there are employees spread about. Two housing navigators share what was once the conference room, which is also stocked with food supplies and toiletries. The shelter store doubles as office space. Some employees work from home or stagger in-person shifts.

On that mid-March day, the shelter’s 60-guest capacity dropped to 20 in order to meet distancing protocols. There was talk of putting a temporary trailer in the parking lot, but that wasn’t going to work. Where there once were six to eight in a dorm room, now it’s two to three. Families and individuals with underlying health concerns were sent to hotels to meet their needs.

“In previous years, it was no problem to throw down mats, break down our conference room as a temporary space to expand,” Spencer-White said. “That’s not possible due to the pandemic.”

Family, cafeteria style dining quickly became a thing of the past. Food is delivered to those at the hotels and at the shelter. Guests eat in the dorm rooms. There used to be a rule of no food in the dorm rooms, but that quickly had to change. Shelter staff brings out 20 banana boxes worth of provisions three times per week to those in hotels. Soon, the hotel capacity will double until the end of March thanks to FEMA grants for winter safety.

While cutting onions in the shelter kitchen, attendant Kevin Lambert reflected on the changes during the pandemic. He used to play cribbage with some guests, but interactions are more limited and always at a distance. Masks are mandatory. Hand sanitizer is everywhere. A new UV filtration system kills viruses in the air.



Kevin Lambert prepares chopped onions Thursday while working in the kitchen of the Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter in Waterville. *Rich Abrahamson/Morning Sentinel* [Buy this Photo](#)

2021, THE NEW NORMAL WITH NO HOUSING

Through the fall and into the winter, the Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter found somewhat of a groove.

Spencer-White credits the Maine State Housing Authority for its support. Every shelter director in the state meets weekly to coordinate coronavirus response protocols. The Maine Department of Health and Human Services, Maine Equal Justice and Community Housing of Maine have also chipped in time and effort to provide support and partnerships.

“I think the relationships that you forge during a crisis like this, that’s how you get through this,” Spencer-White said. “Those things are really, really critical.”

Cullen Ryan, executive director of Community Housing Maine, has worked with the Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter to put chronically homeless people into 35 apartment units in Waterville and surrounding communities, including some which serve families and single individuals. Just under half of those units are serving veterans. The housing is called “Permanent Supportive Housing.” Residents get outreach support from the shelter and rental assistance.

The extension of unemployment benefits, court closures and eviction moratoriums have challenged the shelter's true goal of finding permanent housing. The "revolving door" of housing no longer swings freely.

The average guest at the shelter stays for 45 days, up from an average of 36 days in 2018. In a handful of cases, some guests stay for many months.



The Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter at 19 Colby St. in Waterville. *Rich Abrahamson/Morning Sentinel*. [Buy this Photo](#)

The lack of housing is no fault of the guests. Many have jobs and rental assistance, but there are no available apartments. With winter weather in full swing, the shelter is seeing more instances of hypothermia and frostbite.

In the past, Sovetsky would help upward of 25 individuals per month find stable housing. That number is down to less than 10 on average. Apartments locally were always a challenge to find, but now the Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter looks as far as Lewiston for permanent housing arrangements.

“What we have seen is that people have been staying put, and no one is moving generally who has housing, so we’ve had no vacancies with housing,” Ryan said. “In the last 10 months, things have become more difficult. In general, we are seeing a population more in isolation.”

Locally, the shelter works in tune with the Rev. Maureen Ausbrook of the Waterville United Church of Christ and the Waterville-Winslow Interfaith Council to divvy up responsibilities. The latter, through the Starfish Village Ministry, focuses on utility assistance and home repairs with the shelter focusing on finding housing.

“We saw that there were areas here where we could become more collaborative, and that’s what we’re trying to do,” Ausbrook said.

For example, if Ausbrook hears of a homeless person, the council will put them up in a motel for a night or two while Ausbrook works to get them into the shelter. From there, the ministry may work to find funds for the transition back into permanent housing.

“We were moving toward this to begin with, but the pandemic has made us be a little more creative about it and just learn about what each of us is doing so we don’t duplicate services,” Ausbrook said. “This has been really, really good.”

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Through these efforts, shelters were included as Abbott BinaxNow rapid testing sites, where both guests and staff received tests. The shelter secured a federal waiver and can utilize the tests on anyone who is symptomatic in the community or nonsymptomatic staff who may have been exposed to someone with a positive diagnosis. They are in phase 1B of the COVID-19 vaccine distribution plan, which targets older Mainers, those with high-risk medical conditions and certain frontline essential workers.

There are positives to take away from the pandemic: Relationships with community partners strengthened; and the Youth Empowerment Program, which provides 12 units of permanently supported housing for homeless youth ages 18-24, stayed on track.

“To me, it’s about staying in the field of battle, staying in the game and building mutual relationships of trust,” Spencer-White said. “Now, through building relationships and getting to a place where we have a much greater understanding of the virus, it’s just a different landscape.”

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