

2024
TOPSS
COLD
SHELTER
REPORT



TOPSS 2024 Sheltering

The City of Oxford awarded \$15,000 to TOPSS in January 2024 to shelter our unhoused neighbors during the coldest part of the winter. This shelter utilized local hotels to keep people safe from the elements between January 5th and February 29th.

The collaboration between the Family Resource Center (FRC) and TOPSS for emergency sheltering marks a significant milestone in our relationship and our move toward becoming one organization that works to support the most vulnerable in our community. While the FRC has been utilizing hotels to shelter clients in need for many years, this was the first time TOPSS was involved in more than just providing food and supplies to those in the hotel, which reflects a strategic expansion beyond our core mission of alleviating hunger and providing nutrition information. This effort was only made possible with the invaluable professional and historical knowledge of sheltering from Nicola Rodrigues at the FRC. TOPSS managed the logistical support, financial oversight, and food assistance for the cold shelter, and Nicola at the FRC provided case management, housing assistance, and resources to shelter clients.

Sheltering Efforts

Initially, there was uncertainty about what was expected of a cold shelter. The FRC provides emergency sheltering throughout the year, so it was unclear how committing to a "cold shelter" would be different from what they were already doing on a case-by-case basis. It was important for the TOPSS staff and board to understand what was missing before interfering with the proposal for cold sheltering, which caused some delays.

The FRC's primary program has always centered on homelessness prevention by offering support services and emergency financial assistance for rent and utilities to those at risk of losing housing. The barriers to acquiring housing are a more significant challenge than keeping people in their current housing. Many are teetering on the edge of homelessness, and one unexpected expense or setback can push them over the edge.

In our community, many people are experiencing homelessness and are known by the staff at TOPSS and FRC. Some of them have been struggling with homelessness for years and have already received services multiple times. Despite our efforts, many refuse or don't follow through with the requirements of programs to secure housing (for more on this, please refer to the sheltering considerations on page 4). During the colder months, keeping these individuals safe from the harsh weather becomes challenging, but it is clear that something needs to be done. The FRC's general approach to sheltering includes diverting clients to stay with family or friends, utilizing nearby shelter programs or when funds are available, and, as a last resort, paying for emergency hotel stays. This method helps prioritize those with no other options for a limited hotel stay, supported by local churches and organizations. It is critical to work towards housing goals promptly, as hotel fees, despite discounts, can accumulate rapidly.

The FRC's comprehensive cold-sheltering program of 2021-2022 was a great model of collaboration between clients and case managers to work toward permanent housing. It also helped clients achieve essential goals, such as obtaining employment and mental health services. However, due to limited staffing and time constraints, in January 2024, our primary goal was to implement a basic emergency cold sheltering model. This model offers hotel rooms during freezing temperatures only and basic case management throughout the shelter stay. After this, clients are referred to homeless shelters.

Impact and Outcomes

Throughout January, we supported several clients, including a family already living in a hotel that the FRC had been supporting before this initiative. The arrival of February brought about evictions, expanding our shelter efforts to include several households with no alternative accommodations. At our peak, we assisted seven households in hotels, each with unique needs and challenges.

Our cold shelter program was scheduled to end on February 29th. However, with permission, we used leftover funds from the City of Oxford to continue sheltering those in need past this date. Coincidentally, at the end of February, four more families that we were already working with were evicted from their homes and needed sheltering. With so many households in the hotel, the funds dwindled quickly. By mid-March, we had used up all the city funds and relied on our general funds to continue our assistance. With the help of Kiwanis, we were able to extend our support further, although it remains a difficult challenge to provide shelter for families due to limited funds and the rise in demand for hotel rooms in Oxford in the spring.

Current Status

Ultimately, it does seem that what the FRC had been doing throughout the year was very similar to what the community had been looking for us to do during the cold months. Although the cold shelter program officially ended on February 29, 2024, we currently provide shelter for three families and two individuals, highlighting the ongoing need for such services. Based on the FRC's past experiences, we anticipate this need will continue throughout the year. There is a crucial need for community collaboration and resources to address the complex issue of homelessness, particularly among families with children. Expanding TOPSS' mission to include the Family Resource Center, wrap-around services, and emergency sheltering has been a challenging but necessary and rewarding endeavor, demonstrating our commitment to supporting our community's most vulnerable. We are still learning and growing. We are excited about what's ahead for us and for our community.

Sheltering Considerations

The needs of people experiencing homelessness are complex, and meeting these needs can be complicated. Many of the reasons that people experience homelessness follow them into shelters. It's important to note that these considerations are not judgments on the people experiencing the issues, but they are the realities that people live with that present obstacles in sheltering and, ultimately, housing.

Our approach to addressing the issue of homelessness must be sensitive and tailored to accommodate the varying needs of those without stable housing. It is crucial to recognize that our suggested solutions may not align with the choices of the client. As ethical organizations, we cannot coerce or push individuals to opt for housing or participate in programs or shelters that they are not comfortable with. Our primary responsibility is to provide support and resources to those who are willing to accept them, empowering them to make their own decisions and encouraging them to become self-sufficient. To achieve this, we must acknowledge and manage our own unease with the choices they make, even if we don't fully understand them.

The issue of homelessness is characterized by its transient nature, which implies that solutions should not be limited to a specific location, such as Oxford. Adopting an "Oxfordcentric" approach to homelessness is not only limiting but also fails to consider the dynamic and evolving needs of unhoused individuals who may move or require assistance beyond a single geographic area. Even though our focus is the Talawanda School District, these people are here, unsheltered in our space, which means we have an obligation to assist them. We cannot turn away people who do not have IDs with addresses in the Talawanda School District.

The rent voucher system is one of several critical tools in combating homelessness. However, it comes with significant limitations, such as a finite number of vouchers and a long waiting list with thousands of people in need. The prioritization of these vouchers is based on the duration of an individual's homelessness, which inadvertently excludes those who have not been homeless long enough to be considered. Even after obtaining a voucher, finding suitable and available housing persists, and other immediate financial responsibilities, such as utilities, can be daunting for many.

The housing crisis is a complex issue that poses significant challenges for many people. There are several barriers that make it difficult to find and maintain suitable housing. These barriers can also make sheltering difficult. They include, but are not limited to, a lack of stable income, a history of evictions, criminal records that include violence, and restrictions related to registered sex offenders. Mental health issues also present a significant hurdle, with conditions ranging from hoarding, which can quickly become an issue for a hotel, to behaviors that pose risks to oneself or others, further complicating the housing and sheltering process. In addition, issues related to pets, substance use, and sex work also make it challenging to find suitable shelter.

We understand that many people who have lost everything find it difficult to separate themselves from their pets. This has been an issue in recent months and it's not just a matter of finding foster homes for the pets. Many people are experiencing trauma from eviction or extreme mental health issues and cannot bring themselves to sleep away from their animals. As a result, they choose to sleep in their car or outside rather than let someone else care for their pets. In cases where some hotels do allow pets, the issue of cleanliness quickly becomes an issue as some animals are not trained, some people do not maintain their pet's waste, etc.

Hoarding is a significant issue that can lead to homelessness for many people. Hoarding tendencies can vary in severity, and it may not take much time for a hoarding problem to impact the cleanliness and safety of a hotel room or shelter. In fact, some hoarding tendencies can cause problems in less than a week. Recently, we assisted a client who had hoarding tendencies, which made it challenging for us to find a suitable shelter for them. The hotels would quickly ban the clients, and we had to transport them to another facility. This presented an ethical dilemma for our staff. Do we continue to put the hotels that we work with at risk for damage? How can we not try to shelter a client when it is freezing outside? After several attempts, we could not find any facility in town that would take them. We had no choice but to refer them to shelters in Hamilton or Middletown but they chose not to go, instead setting up camp outside.

It's important to note that just these barriers to housing present a challenge to sheltering itself because if people cannot get to the ultimate goal of housing, a shelter becomes indefinite. This means the use of hotels for sheltering becomes unrealistic. The hotels in Oxford have been incredibly accommodating, but ultimately, they are businesses with their own goals. They cannot house people who damage or destroy property; they cannot allow sex workers to use their facilities; their rooms are not large enough for families; they cannot guarantee room availability indefinitely into the future.

Addressing homelessness requires a holistic and flexible approach, sensitive to the individual circumstances and choices of those we aim to support. Our strategies must be inclusive, recognizing the myriad of barriers to housing and the unique challenges faced by each individual. By fostering a supportive environment that respects autonomy and offers a range of assistance tailored to diverse needs, we can make strides toward alleviating the challenges of homelessness. However, it is important to note that sheltering will continue to present challenges to our staff due to the above-mentioned obstacles. Despite our best efforts, there will always be people living outside.

Sheltering Considerations Continued



Shelter

As you've been reading, putting a roof over someone's head, although it presents its own challenges, is sometimes the easiest part of sheltering. There are many other factors of sheltering to consider. It's also important to note that sheltering is often a prerequisite for housing programs. So, individuals who sleep outside or stay with family or friends would not be eligible for certain housing programs. Even paying for their own hotel room makes them ineligible. Thus making sheltering by a social service agency essential to finding housing.



Access to Food

Access to food for sheltered people presents obstacles for a food pantry. People living in hotels with only microwaves to cook and a mini-fridge have different needs than other clients. Besides needing small, microwavable foods, they need utensils, plates, things to cook with, and can openers. They may need to shop more frequently than other clients, and they may need additional hygiene items. For many of these folks, we are their only source for food and personal care items.



Social Services

The social services provided by Nicola at the FRC are important for many clients as they help them achieve their goals. Nicola works closely with each client and often connects them with other agencies that can help them find housing. The key to success is the client's willingness to cooperate throughout the process. However, sometimes, clients struggle to commit or make decisions that are difficult to understand. Occasionally, clients may even lose their housing after reaching their goal, which can be disheartening for the agency. It is important to note that while Nicola is always willing to help, clients must also be invested and committed to the programs offered to achieve self-sustainability. Nicola finds it rewarding to see clients move up and out of her care, but she also recognizes that burnout and fatigue can occur in her line of work. Ultimately, clients need to be willing to work towards their own success. The partnership between client and agency is key to ensuring client success.



Other Obstacles

Many obstacles can hinder sheltered clients from accessing housing and housing programs. Apart from pets (as previously mentioned), lack of identification can also cause issues. For instance, hotels require photo identification, and missing IDs, birth certificates, and social security cards can all pose challenges to obtaining housing. Unfortunately, most people experiencing homelessness do not have access to these documents due to a lack of funds and transportation to acquire them or access to agencies that can provide assistance. This is where the FRC steps in and assists clients with getting documents, sometimes providing the funds needed. Additionally, timing can also present barriers to housing. For instance, a program may be available, but a client may need certain items, and the spot may be taken before they can obtain them. These obstacles often compound the challenges faced by our clients.

Sheltering Stats

Household Breakdown 1/5 - 3/29

Clients	Single	Couples (Adults)	Single Parents	2 Parent Families	Children
24	7	1	4	0	12

Cold Shelter 1/5 - 2/29	
Number of People	16
Rooms Used	9
Weeks Paid	20
Avg Stay	2.5 Weeks

Continued Sheltering 1/5 - 3/29	
Number of People	25
Rooms Used	12
Weeks Paid	63
Avg Stay	5.25 Weeks

Avg Cost Per Room: \$465/Week

Avg Time of Staff Per Week: 6 Hrs/Client

Avg Spent Per Client: \$800

Avg Spent Per Household: \$1667

<p>Reasons for Homelessness:</p> <p>Substance Abuse</p> <p>Eviction Low or No Income</p> <p>Untreated Mental Illness</p> <p>Domestic Violence</p> <p>Dispute with Roomates</p>
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Financial Breakdowns

Cold Shelter Jan. 5 - Feb. 29th

Total Hotel Room Rental	\$8,890
Total Food Expense	\$400
Staff Time (\$20/hr)	\$1,440

Total \$10,730.00

Continued Sheltering March 1 Forward

Total Hotel Room Rental	\$11,108
Total Food Expense	\$400
Staff Time (\$20/hr)	\$1,440

Total \$12,948.00

Total Expense 1/5 - 3/29: \$23,678.00

Meet Jane

At the age of 75, Jane found herself navigating the harsh reality of homelessness and turned to us for help. Having retired from a humble but fulfilling career, Jane's life took a dramatic turn when a devastating flood destroyed her home. With limited options, she relocated to Ohio, seeking refuge with her son and grandchild in their cramped apartment. It wasn't long before it became obvious that Jane's son was struggling with a severe addiction, leading to a rapid deterioration of their living conditions. Despite her efforts to support him, his recurring legal and financial troubles led to their eviction.

Jane's son and grandchild found a place to stay with some friends. With little to her name aside from a pair of shoes, some personal items, and her cherished cat, Jane faced loss once again. Since the cold shelter was still going strong, the city's social worker referred Jane to us to be sheltered. We arranged for Jane to check into a hotel room on a weekly basis and be connected to resources and case management.

Jane was heartbroken and understandably unwilling to surrender her cat, which had become a companion. In a last-ditch effort to keep her animal friend, she snuck the cat into the hotel we provided. When they realized Jane had brought a cat to the hotel room, the hotel management was understandably upset and refused to renew Jane's stay for another week.

Because she had not heard from her son since the eviction and did not own a car, I was called for help. I drove over to the hotel to pick up Jane and her belongings. Instead of judgment or lecturing, I simply assisted. We loaded some clothes, a cactus, and her cat into the car. I was able to convince Jane to let me foster her cat while she stayed at the new hotel. We went together to set up a space for the cat with her litter box and some food. When we returned to the car, Jane started to cry. She told me all about the flood and the following events that had led her here. She put her hand on her face, looked out the car window, and said, "I didn't think it would all end up like this. I used to make a good living and live a good life. I never thought I'd end up here."

-Sherry Martin
Executive Director, TOPSS

**“I never
thought
I'd end
up here”**



Conclusion

Our experiences with this year's cold sheltering project have been enlightening. We have successfully navigated through uncharted waters, overcome unexpected challenges, and emerged with invaluable lessons. Despite the uncertainties that lie ahead, the insights we've gained have given us the confidence to face future programs. We are certain that the lessons we've learned will be instrumental in shaping our future sheltering initiatives.

One of the main concerns we have identified is the over-reliance on hotels as a temporary shelter solution. While hotels have played a crucial role in addressing this problem, this model is limited and unsustainable due to its high costs, logistical challenges, and the lack of a supportive environment for longer-term assistance. Our lack of a dedicated space for sheltering exacerbates these challenges. As we look forward to expanding our services and relocating to a new facility next year, the possibility of allocating space within our existing structures for emergency shelter seems promising. However, we recognize that we need to address a critical issue: we currently lack the necessary staff to efficiently operate such a program.

Effective staffing is not just about having enough personnel; having individuals with the right skills to supervise and support the sheltered is crucial. This is vital to ensure clients' and staff's safety at all times. We strongly believe that opening a shelter without having the right amount of staff and funding to manage and sustain the commitment would be irresponsible to the neighbors we serve. It is crucial to avoid making decisions that compromise the important work that we're already doing in the areas of eviction/homelessness prevention, housing and food assistance.

Despite the challenges, there is still hope for solutions. One potential solution is to work with other local organizations like OASH (Oxford Area Solutions for Housing). By collaborating with OASH, we can combine our resources and expertise to create more effective sheltering solutions. This partnership, along with collaboration with the City of Oxford and other local nonprofits, would not only enable us to address the issues we face but also help us create more sustainable solutions.

As we look back on the successes and challenges of this year's efforts to provide shelter, it's important to acknowledge that despite our best attempts, because of some of the challenges we've mentioned (and some we did not), there will always be people who experience homelessness in our community. There will always be people who live outside. This doesn't mean we're not working hard to house them, but it's a harsh reality of the world and systems we live in. We will continue to reach out to these individuals, provide them with support, and encourage them toward housing.

We feel strengthened by the knowledge we've gained and the lives we've impacted over the last few months. The path ahead may be uncertain, but our commitment to making a difference remains resolute. Together, with the help of our community and partners, we will continue to explore inventive ideas and work towards a future where every person has access to secure, stable housing.

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The TOPSS Cold Shelter was made possible by the following contributors:

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The Oxford Faith Community

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