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EDITOR'S PICK

Shelters fear outbreak, seek state action

By Allison Corneau acorneau@eagletribune.com
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CARL RUSSO/Staff photo The Emmaus House on How Street in Haverhill. At Emmaus, we know that homelessness can happen to anyone and increasingly affects families. We provide both immediate assistance and long-term solutions through emergency shelters, affordable housing, job training, and more. 3/26/2020

Carl Russo

Jeanine Murphy has barely hung up her phone in two weeks.

She said she has constantly been reaching out to hotels, colleges, universities and even convents across the Merrimack Valley to see who may be able to house residents from the Emmaus shelter in Haverhill, where she serves as president and chief executive officer.

She needs a plan in place in the event one of the shelter's residents is stricken with COVID-19.

Murphy understands she's operating on borrowed time. In that same two weeks of making frantic calls, two residents at Emmaus' emergency shelter, Mitch's Place, have been tested after experiencing symptoms of the virus.

Murphy said one resident tested negative — after waiting a week for results — and another is anxious to learn the outcome.

“Our thought has always been that by the time someone has a fever or tests positive, it's too late,” Murphy said. “Our staff has been on the front lines of this for a long time, dealing with people that have chronic and long-term health conditions. But this virus is so different.”

According to Murphy, once a homeless patient is swabbed locally for coronavirus, he or she is sent to Boston, where a shelter set up outdoor tents for the homeless to quarantine while awaiting results.

Should a person test positive, those from Mitch's Place would not be able to return.

Murphy has diligently worked alongside state Rep. Andy Vargas, D-Haverhill, and representatives from the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency to push Gov. Charlie Baker's office to open isolation sites that would allow the homeless population from Haverhill and elsewhere to isolate before they need to quarantine.

“We really believe it's the state's mission to do this and it's a waiting game,” Murphy said.

In the meantime, Emmaus, which also welcomes families at Emmaus House, strives to keep residents and staff as healthy as possible. They maintain a “cough log” and “sick log.” And Murphy said their common areas sparkle so much that “you can eat off the floor” after they were sanitized by one of the city's “germ blasters” on loan from the Haverhill school department.

Cleanliness and social distancing practices are also in place at Lawrence's Lazarus House, where Executive Director Jeff Hassel has had to hire extra staff as a precaution.

“Our staff is nervous and we're not going to force people to work,” Hassel said of the employees that man the emergency shelter, temporary housing, soup kitchen and food pantry bearing the Lazarus House Ministries name.

“We made an agreement with them that their salary will continue,” Hassel said. “We told them they can work as long as they're comfortable, then they can stay home, take care of their families and themselves, and we'll see them on the other side of this. One thing we don't want to do is add to the economic disaster of this.”

The agency has made the heartbreaking decision to shutter its thrift store and Sparkle cleaning service until the crisis subsides. Hassel hopes he won't have to make further cuts.

“If we have to shut down the shelter, those people don't have a place to go. They're back on the street with their kids,” he said. “We will do everything we can to keep that shelter open.”

When all is said and done, Murphy hopes the COVID-19 crisis will be a reminder that a little kindness goes a long way.

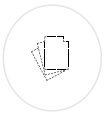
“The bottom line is that these are human beings and there but for the grace of God go you or I,” she said. “It's not simplistic. That's what we need to look at as a society and I know there will be a lot of looking back. I hope there's not a lot of finger pointing. I hope there's a lot of lessons learned.”

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