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Homeless Shelters—Basic Guidelines When Opening Your Parish

While your parish may not sponsor a homeless shelter, your parish may open up your facilities in the event of inclement weather or a catastrophe. In opening up your facility, it is important to research the local ordinances around shelters, even temporary shelters. It is also important to work with the Parish staff and volunteers as to the responsibility they have in working with the homeless.

During a recent five-year period, the cost of claims incurred by parish homeless shelters

was approximately \$155,703.08. Two percent of the claims reported were due to auto accidents; 18 percent of claims reported were due to workers compensation; 38 percent of claims were due to general liability; and another 38 percent were due to property damage.

Some of the specific claims reported included a homeless shelter employee bitten by a client's child; assault on homeless shelter volunteers and workers by clients; vandalism to facilities including fires set to carpeting and gym doors; injuries to homeless shelter employees and volunteers from lifting materials and slips, trips and falls due to ice and uneven walking surfaces. Other claims included damage to homeless shelter facilities from burst pipes and severe weather.

To prevent similar claims for occurring at your Parish Homeless Shelter, consider the following guidelines.

Guests entering your facility should be treated with respect. However, they need to be informed of any ground rules the Parish may have, as well as the Parish staff and volunteers. Guidelines the Parish may develop and communicate to guests can include:

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- Hours of operation
- Registration procedures
- Appropriate clothing
- No alcohol or drug usage or being under the influence upon entry
- No weapons
- No abusive threatening or profane language or actions
- No stealing or damage to another guest, volunteer or staff member
- No pets unless the pet is a service dog
- No disposal of personal belongings or human waste on property

Many of the staff and volunteers within the Parish may not have worked with homeless guests. Here are some of the basics in working with homeless guests:

- Allow the homeless guests to own their successes and their failures.
- It is imperative to maintain order and discipline at all times.



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“Provide the guests with the dignity and respect that they do not receive during the day.”

- Encourage the homeless guests to make healthy and life-giving decisions without directing or leading them.
- Allow homeless guests to experience their feelings while assisting them in the appropriate ways to express those feelings.
- Show compassion. One need not have experienced the actual pain of a situation in order to understand what the individual is going through; trust your intuition.
- Allow the homeless guests to explore options and come up with solutions to their problems without feeling the need to fix their problems for them.

When staff or volunteers are interfacing with homeless guests, please remember TO:

- Smile, be positive.
- Be a good listener.
- Look everyone in the eyes and think of how to make each guest feel special.
- Have fun and enjoy the good in everyone.
- Visit with the guests during their time in the shelter; show hospitality.
- Provide the guests with the dignity and respect that they do not receive during the day.
- Only provide access to predesignated areas.
- Review all emergency procedures with guests.

When staff or volunteers are interfacing with homeless guests, please remember to NOT:

- Give out your last name, address, telephone number, or other personal identification to the guests. If you have youth volunteers, remind them to NOT give out their school name or wear

clothes with the school logo.

- Advise guests when the volunteer is next scheduled to work.
- Provide transportation for guests.
- Carry money with you to the site.
- Lend money to guests.
- Provide medication of any type (even aspirin).
- Take personal laundry home for guests.
- Clean up any bodily fluids, especially blood, unless you are wearing the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE), and have been trained in bloodborne pathogens.
- Secure employment for guests.
- Allow the guests to attach themselves to the volunteer, creating differentiation.
- Ask probing or personal questions.

- Purchase items for or from guests.
- Socialize outside of the shelter environment.
- Contact a referral agency on behalf of a guest.
- Participate in promoting religious beliefs during site operation.

If youth volunteer with the homeless shelter, it is important for them to work side-by-side with adult staff or volunteers, and not be left alone with the guests. Adult staff or volunteers should be supervising the youth volunteers at all times. It is also important that signed parental approval by a parent or guardian be submitted to the Parish, prior to the youth volunteering in the shelter.

It is important for your parish to determine how your facility will be used for homeless guests. Ask yourself about what your parish wants to do. Does your parish wish to simply supply shelter or provide meals and laundry service as well? Either way, these are some basic steps for your parish to utilize when developing a homeless shelter program, or simply opening up your facility during inclement weather.

