

Prohibiting Tent Removals and Opening Warming Shelters in Freezing Weather: Presentation to Budget and Policy Committee

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The Problem

- Public health and safety necessarily includes protecting human life
- Sweeps in freezing temperatures lower life expectancy by forcing relocations in dangerous conditions
- In the interests of public health and safety, this ordinance would protect the health of its homeless residents exposed to freezing temperature, and hold off city sweeps + ensure warming shelters open when temps fall to or below freezing



Photo Credit: Westword, Sarah Fleming

Relevant Research

Study in Poland of 615 people experiencing homelessness:

- In a six year period, 176 people died, mostly in cold stress conditions
- 40% of deaths in moderate cold stress, 9% in strong cold stress
- Risk of death during moderate cold stress increases by 84%

Study in Canada on temperature conditions and hypothermia risk for 883 persons experiencing homelessness:

- 79 injuries and 18 deaths
- Most injuries and deaths occurred during low/moderate cold stress
- Odds of experiencing hypothermic event increased 1.64-fold with every 5 degrees Celsius decrease in temperature

Public Health Perspective

- The human body is not built for extended time in cold weather — frostbite can happen in less than 30 min below 5 degrees Fahrenheit
- Frostbite can lead to hospitalization and amputation – homeless persons are highly vulnerable
 - Less likely to discharge with supportive medical care, less likely to have insurance
- Nonfreezing cold injuries include trench foot and pernio, exacerbated in wet conditions

WARNING: Next Slide: Graphic Image of Frostbite



Pictured: Deep frostbite causing deep tissue damage and amputation. Source: American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons

Tent Sheltering in Cold Temps

- Tent-types vary widely; but some are designed for colder temps
 - No consistent tool to measure, manufacturers apply metrics differently, and generally range from Seasons 1-5
 - Estimates vary based on ventilation, size, and other factors, but generally tents are about 10-20 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than external conditions
- Tents mitigate against exacerbating damp or wet conditions, like snow or rain
- Sleeping Bags: A compact sleeping bag liner can provide an additional 15 to 25 degrees of warmth
- Tents in cold weather do not eliminate risk of harm in cold temperatures, but can reduce immediate risk

Denver's Cold Weather Shelter Policy

- Average winter temperature in Denver last year was 32.9 degrees, with several days below 5 degrees
- Warming centers offer refuge and prevent cold weather injuries
- Current City Policy: Open warming centers when existing shelter capacity is exceeded AND 1) temperatures drop below 20 degrees; 2) over two inches of snow forecast; or 3) wind-chill advisory/watch/warning
 - No scientifically valid evidence supporting this temperature threshold, per Dr. Josh Barocas
 - Compare to "Code Blue" in NYC, threshold set at 32 degrees or below

Cost/Benefit

- In Dec 2022: 1 Denver hospital, 49 homeless persons with frostbite diagnosis, average 7 day stay, avg cost of \$3,273 per day
 - = \$1.1m total
- Estimated cost to taxpayers for frostbite: \$1.1M each year per metro area hospital
 - More than \$5,000,000/year for the five Metro area hospitals combined
 - Estimate does not include for hypothermia
- Estimated Cost of Shelter
 - 90 days of warming centers opening, at a \$50,000/day cost = \$4.5m



Proposed Changes to City Code

- Sec 24-16 (b) (DDPHE powers): "(b)The manager may not order the removal of any shelter, as defined in section 38-86.2(d)(1), when the external ambient temperature is predicted by the National Weather Service to be thirty-two (32) degrees Fahrenheit or lower during the period when the removal will occur or within four (4) hours after anticipated completion of the removal. Provided, however, it shall be an exception to this subsection if the manager certifies in the order, by reasons of facts stated in writing, that removal of a shelter is necessary to mitigate a condition that would cause greater imminent peril to the health or safety of any person than the threat to health posed by exposure to existing weather conditions.

Proposed Changes to City Code

- Sec 38-86.2 (camping ban) "(c) No law enforcement officer shall issue a citation, make an arrest or otherwise enforce this section against any person unless: (1) The external ambient temperature is predicted by the National Weather Service to be thirty-two (32) degrees Fahrenheit or higher during the period of enforcement; or (2) The manager of the Department of Public Health and Environment has certified, by reasons of facts stated in writing, that enforcement is or was necessary to mitigate a condition that would cause greater imminent peril to the health or safety of any person than the threat to health posed by exposure to existing weather conditions; and" [*existing requirements*]

Proposed Changes to City Code

- Sec 49-246 (DOTI right of way enforcement) “(b)The manager may not order the removal of any shelter, as defined in section 38-86.2(d)(1), when the external ambient temperature is predicted by the National Weather Service to be thirty-two (32) degrees Fahrenheit or lower during the period when the removal will occur or within four (4) hours after anticipated completion of the removal. Provided, however, it shall be an exception to this subsection if the manager of the Department of Public Health and Environment has certified, by reasons of facts stated in writing, that removal of a shelter is or was necessary to mitigate a condition that would cause greater imminent peril to the health or safety of any person than the threat to health posed by exposure to existing weather conditions.”

Proposed Changes to City Code

- Sec. 16-1. – Cold Weather Sheltering (new section)
- The executive director of the department of housing stability, or its successor agency, in coordination with the director of emergency management, the manager of the department of parks and recreation, and other applicable city agencies, shall order the opening of warming centers at public and private facilities operating under contract, as feasible, to provide temporary shelter when the external ambient temperature is predicted by the National Weather Service to be thirty-two (32) degrees Fahrenheit or lower.

Sources

- Westword, "Opinion: Denver Must Create a Plan to Prevent Cold Weather Injuries Among Unhoused Neighbors", 11/12/2023
- Presentation: Josh Barocas, Denver City Council Safety Committee, 11/22/2023
- Zhang P, et al. Cold weather conditions and risk of hypothermia among people experiencing homelessness: implications for prevention strategies. IJERPH. 2019, 16(18), 3259
- Romaszko J, Cymes I, Dragańska E, Kuchta R, Glińska-Lewczuk K (2017) Mortality among the homeless: Causes and meteorological relationships. PLoS ONE 12(12): e0189938. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0189938>
- Princeton University, "Outdoor Action Guide to Winter Camping", [Outdoor Action Guide to Winter Camping \(princeton.edu\)](https://www.princeton.edu/outdoor-action-guide-to-winter-camping)
- NYC Street Outreach, Code Blue. <https://www.nyc.gov/site/dhs/outreach/street-outreach.page#:~:text=Code%20Blue,Code%20Blue%20will%20be%20denied>





B-K Community Engagement™

2023 Cold Weather Engagement



Conduct a B-K Community Engagement™
capturing the general sentiment of
Unhoused Residents in the Denver area as
well as amplifying their authentic voices





B-K Community Engagement™ Question Type



Agree , Neutral , or Disagree?



I feel I have adequate clothing to be outdoors in freezing temperatures



I feel I have adequate shelter to keep myself and my belongings safe in freezing temperatures



I am confident that city programs and services can help me ensure I have adequate clothing and shelter in freezing temperatures



Fear of losing my personal belongings impacts my decision to seek shelter in the winter



B-K Community Engagement™ Question Type

Free response - Respondents' Actual Voices

1

What scenario(s) would present a greater risk to you than being outside in freezing temperatures?

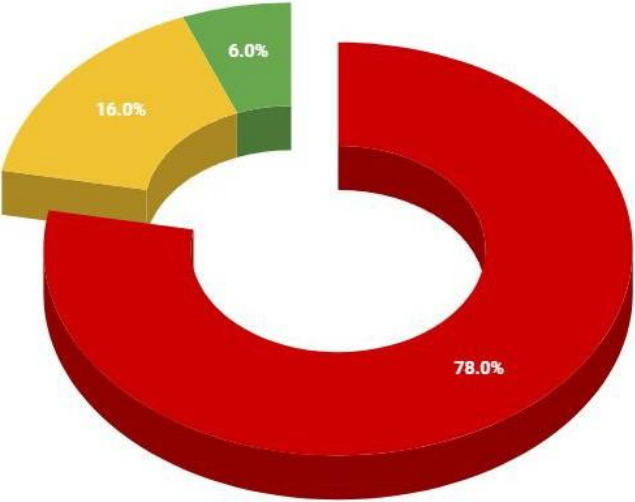
2

Do you have any additional feedback you'd like to provide?



I feel I have adequate clothing to be outdoors in freezing temperatures

Adequate Clothing



6% Agree

16% Neutral

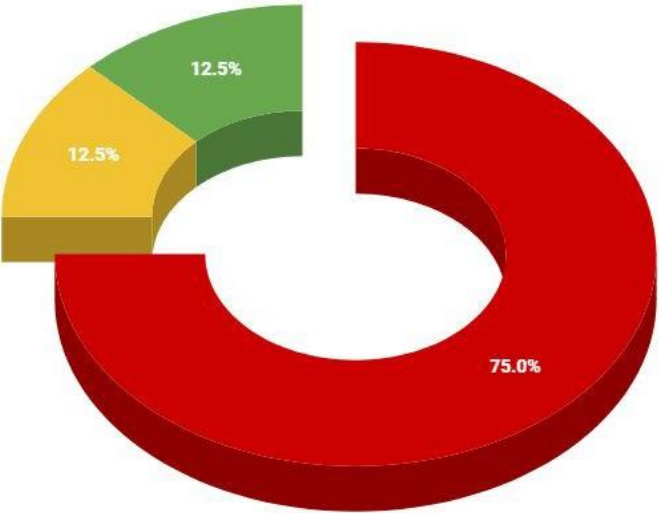
78% Disagree





Ifel I have adequate shelter to keep myself and my belongings safe in freezing temperatures

Adequate Shelter



12.5% Agree

12.5% Neutral

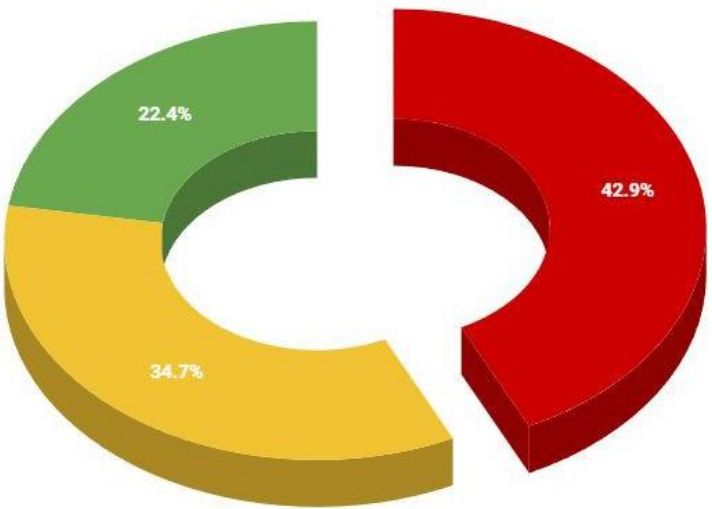
75% Disagree





I am confident that city programs and services can help me ensure I have adequate clothing and shelter in freezing temperatures

Confidence In Programs



22.4% Agree

34.7% Neutral

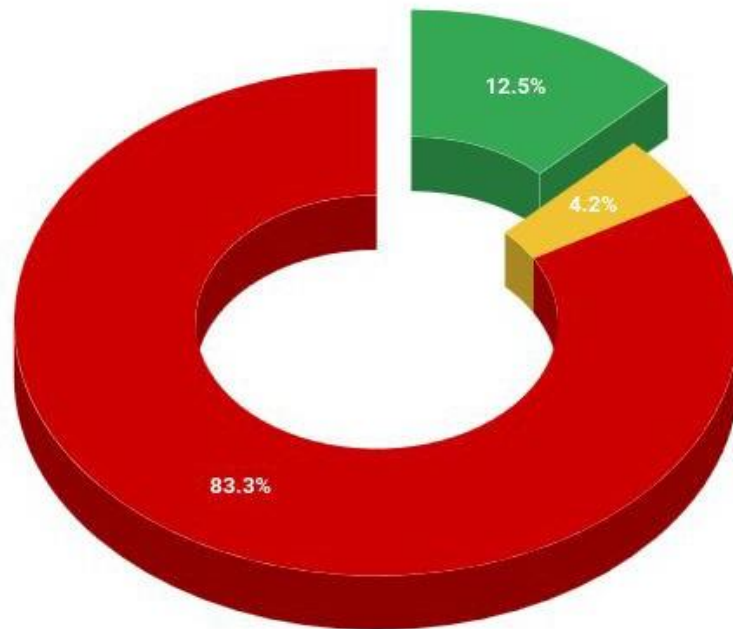
42.9% Disagree





Fear of losing my personal belongings impacts my decision to seek shelter in the winter

Fear Of Losing Possessions Prevents Seeking Shelter

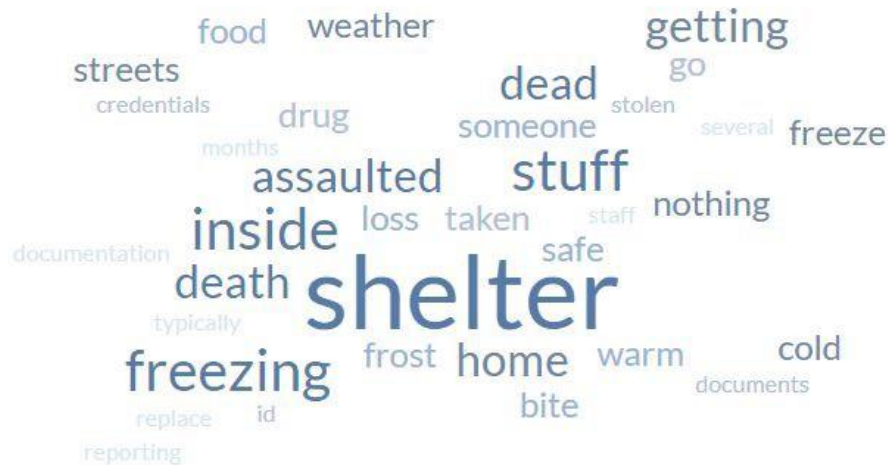


12.5% Disagree

4.2% Neutral

83.3% Agree

What scenario(s) would present a greater risk to you than being outside in freezing temperatures?



"Losing everything all over again"

"Going to jail or a shelter and catching COVID"

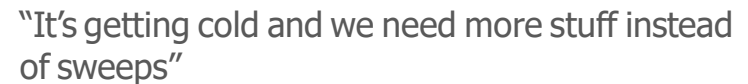
"Being dead because I've been forgotten about"

"Stepping on dirty needles or getting shot at"

"Being sexually assaulted"

"A natural disaster, like a blizzard coming to town"

"That's pretty much it. There is no greater risk."



“More availability on weekends; everything’s closed Sunday and Saturday”

“[I’m] having to steal to survive and getting treated badly for being homeless”

"It's getting real cold and we need warmer blanket and sleeping bags"

"All the shelters are packed and you have to meet certain expectations as well as food banks you can only go so many times and that is the same with clothing and get what you can and it counts as a time if you get something good or not."

"Denver rocks and gives me much hope"

Key takeaways from list of fears:



Security and Safety Concerns

1. Fear of assault, violence, and bullying both on the streets and within shelters.
2. Concerns about the safety and cleanliness of shelters, including drug-related issues.
3. Anxiety about personal safety during extreme weather conditions.

Loss of Belongings and Documentation

1. Fear of belongings being stolen, especially important documents and IDs.
2. Frustration with the unresponsiveness of staff when reporting theft or loss.

Health and Environmental Risks

1. Anxiety about exposure to extreme weather conditions, leading to frostbite or freezing.
2. Fear of exposure to dirty needles and potential health risks.

Housing and Stability

1. Desire for stable housing and steady income to avoid the challenges of homelessness.
2. Fear of losing everything again, including belongings, due to law enforcement actions.



Key takeaways from list of fears:



Emotional Well-being

1. Fear of emotional theft, loss, and the impact of traumatic events on mental health.
2. Concerns about being isolated and the emotional toll of homelessness.

Specific Concerns for Vulnerable Populations

1. Homophobia and discrimination within the shelter environment.
2. Specific worries expressed by female respondents about safety during travel.

Access to Basic Needs

1. Fear of hunger and lack of access to food and basic necessities.
2. Need for warmth and essentials during cold weather.

Institutional Concerns

1. Distrust of shelters due to perceived racism, unsafe environments, and inadequate response to property loss.
2. Concerns about catching illnesses, including COVID-19, in shelters.

Potential Action Items and Proposed Solutions



Improving Shelter Conditions

1. Addressing safety concerns within shelters, including drug-related issues.
2. Ensuring a responsive and supportive staff to address theft and security issues.

Enhancing Homeless Services

1. Providing resources such as blankets, warm clothing, and essentials during colder months.
2. Implementing policies that prevent the removal of belongings without offering suitable alternatives.

Promoting Mental Health Support

1. Increasing mental health training for shelter staff to create a safer environment.
2. Addressing concerns related to emotional well-being and isolation.

Advocacy Against Discrimination

1. Addressing homophobia and discrimination within shelter facilities.
2. Ensuring shelters are inclusive and safe for all individuals, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.



Potential Action Items and Proposed Solutions



Documentation and ID Protection

1. Implementing measures to safeguard personal documents and IDs within the homeless population.
2. Streamlining the replacement process for stolen documentation.

Community Engagement and Education

1. Educating the community on the challenges faced by the homeless population.
2. Fostering a sense of empathy and understanding to reduce discrimination.

Emergency Preparedness

1. Developing and communicating emergency plans for extreme weather conditions.
2. Ensuring shelters have measures in place to prevent the spread of illnesses, including COVID-19.

Housing Solutions

1. Prioritizing efforts to provide stable housing and income opportunities.
2. Implementing programs to prevent the recurrence of homelessness and loss of belongings.

Summary

Unhoused Residents of Denver expressed specific fears surrounding cold weather. The majority of unhoused residents do not feel they have adequate clothing or shelter. Only around half of residents have confidence in programs and services meeting their needs, with a large majority citing fear of losing their personal belongings – and specifically loss of identification cards and vital documents – as directly impacting their decision on seeking shelter in freezing temperatures.

Despite these challenges, Unhoused Residents were eager to share their candid views and authentic voices with B-Konnected, suggesting that they believe the City of Denver will acknowledge their fears and work with them towards both short- and long-term solutions.



Thank you.

