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**WELCOMING WATERTOWN**  
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## **PROPOSAL FOR PUBLIC/PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP TO CREATE A WATERTOWN EMERGENCY WARMING SHELTER**

***Presented by the Building a Welcoming Watertown Organization***

***June, 2025***

### ***Summary of Proposal***

This proposal seeks to establish a Warming Shelter in the City of Watertown that would be available to persons with no safe place to spend the overnight hours during extreme weather conditions. The shelter would provide a warm, dry, safe overnight venue for any person finding themselves without safe indoor shelter at any time the winter weather conditions hit a designated trigger. The proposal envisions a simple warming space with minimal services, not a more complex homeless shelter with multiple services and facilities. A cot with appropriate bedding, a simple evening meal, and a to go bag of breakfast/lunch items would be provided. The proposal seeks to create a partnership between the City and local citizens affiliated with participating local public service organizations or area churches (local volunteers). The City would be asked to provide the space in a secure public building, security as deemed appropriate and any expenses associated with the facility's use. The local volunteers would agree to obtain training in collaboration with City officials, donate their time to staff the facility, and provide the funds for cots, bedding, supplies and food provided as part of the Warming Shelter Services. No religious programming would be provided.

### ***Description of Need***

There is an unfortunate misperception among many in our community that ‘we have no homeless people in Watertown’. In part, this misunderstanding is due to problems in how we define a ‘homeless’ person. Area school personnel, local businesses, public facilities managers, and area clergy all know that, on any given day, there are people in Watertown who don’t have a safe place to sleep overnight. The number of people in need at any given time may vary, given each person’s individual circumstances. But we **do** have some idea of the likely need, based upon information available through our school system, public health agencies, and the Community Action Coalition (CAC) which does a “point in time” (PIT) count overnight twice per year.

Information from the CAC disclosed that as of Feb 24, 2025, 47 households in Jefferson County, including Watertown, met the federal govt. definitions of “homeless”:

- 15 households consisting of families with children
- 31 households consisting of families without children
- 1 Veteran household living in a vehicle. .

In addition, on the night of Jan 23, 2025, the CAC conducted an overnight Point in Time (PIT) count of those experiencing homelessness. 13 households were identified on that single night either living in a vehicle or on a hotel voucher for an overnight stay.

The Watertown Unified School District also keeps data on housing needs affecting their student population. It is our understanding that, as of spring, 2025, the District has identified a total of 39 families with 56 children who are experiencing homelessness. Some of these families are ‘couch surfing’, some are on short term hotel vouchers, some are in actual temporary shelters. The bottom line, however, is that on any given winter night, any of these families including their children could be on the street without a safe overnight option unless a Warming Shelter is available.

Tragically, this past winter one person died on our streets sleeping outdoors during severe winter weather conditions. It is also our understanding that a second person was found dead over this past winter in a local storage facility that the individual was attempting to use for shelter. This sad reality is on all of our consciences and likely could have been avoided had a simple, secure, non-threatening, warm space overnight been available.

### ***Current Options for Emergency Housing are Inadequate***

Existing ‘options’ cited as available to people in need of overnight shelter are simply inadequate. Clergy and members of the public have been regularly told that persons can shelter at the police

department lobby or in a local laundromat space. Neither option is adequate as people seeking shelter there are regularly directed away from these locations by those on staff at the time.

Nor is the overnight voucher program available through the Police Dept and Salvation Army an adequate remedy. While its goal is well intentioned, the stated policy of a “one night use only” is not well understood and provides no help to someone who needs overnight safe housing when it is below zero three nights in a row. Nor does such a policy reflect the reality that most people may eventually be able to secure a safe housing location but need weeks to get into an assistance pipeline. The misperception that strictly applying this one night rule ensures folks will “move on” ignores the reality that most have no financial resources for transport, nor a quick change in their circumstances overnight to eliminate their need.

### ***Outline of Proposal's Details***

The proposal seeks a partnership between local government and community groups willing to volunteer time and money to make this a reality. We believe a partnership is preferable to a fully private endeavor because: 1) public safety and policing of our public spaces is a government responsibility, 2) the ideal location for a safe warming space is in the walkable downtown, which has potentially viable public spaces, 3) the most likely church buildings and/or private spaces downtown do not have the kind of facilities and accessibility that public buildings offer, 4) a partnership enables the volunteer organizations to focus on the ‘soft needs’ of such a shelter, such as staffing and supplies and takes most of the burden off of the public sector.

### ***Operational Structure and Staff***

The Warming Shelter is proposed to operate at the designated location on nights triggered by weather conditions during the months of November through April. There are two possible trigger options for determining when the Shelter should open. Option 1 would open the shelter any time that the overnight temperature were forecast to fall below 32 degrees Fahrenheit. Option 2 would select a more severe weather “trigger”—such as any time that the National Weather Service issued any kind of Winter Weather Event.. such as Winter Weather Advisory, a Winter Temperature Warning, etc.

If conditions triggered the Warming Shelter to open, the designated volunteers on the schedule for that time period would be responsible for contacting the City’s designated Representative to ensure the facility would be opened for that night’s use. The proposal envisions opening at 4 pm and closing at 7 am the next morning. Volunteer staff of appropriate gender balance would staff the facility overnight and ensure clean up in the morning after closing.

The proposal seeks input from the Dept of Public Health, the Police Department, and any other agency deemed appropriate to consult with the volunteer organizations participating to ensure the volunteer staff collaborate with local and broader resources to obtain necessary training. City agency advice as to public health protocols to follow, services needed, or other considerations would be most welcome.

### ***Proposal Sponsors***

This proposal has been put forth by the Building a Welcoming Watertown (BWW) organization. Founded two years ago, BWW is a coalition of private citizens who gathered together to help identify community needs. Its stated goal is to “foster connections within our community and encourage respectful discussion and discernment about ways to make our City a more safe, affordable and welcoming place to live for everyone.” BWW is in the process of organizing itself as a nonprofit organization for long term sustainability. BWW envisions providing the initial organizational leadership for the private portion of this partnership but would welcome working with, and hopes to include, any other community groups which wish to be involved. Information about our activities and meetings can be accessed on our Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61566963751671&mibextid=LQQJ4d>

### ***Timeline for Implementation***

Our group proposes that designees on behalf of the City and BWW representatives work together this spring and early summer for a more detailed proposal to be presented to the Mayor and City Council for approval in time to open a Warming Shelter by the end of October, 2025.

More information may be obtained from The Building a Welcoming Watertown Housing Subcommittee. Please contact the Warming Shelter Campaign Coordinator, the Rev. Dr. Christopher Ross, Pastor of First Congregational United Church of Christ of Watertown, at [rev.fatmoses@gmail.com](mailto:rev.fatmoses@gmail.com)

*This proposal was adopted and endorsed by the Building a Welcoming Watertown Organization on June 1, 2025 The proposal drafted by The Rev Monica Burkert-Brist, Attorney at Law State Bar No. 1009882*