

COLD WEATHER AND ITS AFFECT ON ITHACA'S HOMELESS COMMUNITY

By Maia Noah

Edwin Dejesus makes the trek to his shack located at the back of the Jungle, out by the railroad tracks, behind the local Lowes. He wheels his bike by his side, one of the few personal items he owns. The dead grass rustles beneath his feet as he tries to dodge the puddles of mud left behind from the rain the previous night.

The Jungle is an area that, on average, 15 to 20 people depend on as their place of permanent residence. Tents, mattresses and tarps scatter the woods, comprising the Jungle. The homeless community sets up their tents within this area simply hoping they will have enough resources to sustain themselves.

For Dejesus, commonly known as Sinbad within the Ithaca, New York community, the Jungle has served as his place of residence on and off for the past 14 years. He constructed his own shack in the Jungle after two months of diligently building. Made out of plywood and tarp, the construction became his primary source of shelter throughout many of the cold winter months in Ithaca, NY.

Cold weather has been a major obstacle for Dejesus. However, he is not the only one. The homeless population in Tompkins County suffers greatly from the cold weather months. Although there are cold weather policies in place, many people believe more comprehensive cold weather policies are needed.

There are many reasons why someone becomes homeless. Everyone has their own story, according to Madeline Burns, development assistant at the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program.

For example, she said there are the concerns with a lack of affordable housing and access to services for people with disabilities. There are also concerns with many of the systems in place, such as the foster care system and the correction and incarceration systems.

Additionally personal experiences and relationships have the potential of factoring into someone becoming homeless. These personal experiences or relationships can range from domestic abuse to losing a loved one or losing a job, all of which could cause a great deal of trauma. An individual could also struggle with mental health issues or substance abuse and lack adequate services and resources to support them, further contributing to their likelihood of becoming homeless as well.

Lack of Affordable Housing in Ithaca, New York

For Dejesus, it was personal, as well as as due to a lack of affordable housing. After the passing of his mother, Dejesus said he "lost it" and moved to Ithaca, New York. It was at that point in his life when he became homeless. The lack of affordable housing in Ithaca was an additional contributing factor to his homeless state; \$1,600 to \$1,800 was simply too much for him to spend on a place to live.

The average cost to rent an apartment in Ithaca, New York, as of March 2019, is \$1,696. One bedroom apartments in Ithaca run on average, \$1,171 a month, while two bedroom apartments cost about \$1,678 a month to rent.

Cold Weather Policy in Place

Homelessness statistics

About 44% of the Nation's Homeless are unsheltered



In 2018, 91 people were experiencing homelessness in Tompkins County (Unsheltered, in transitional housing, or in emergency shelters)



15-20 people permanently live in The Jungle in Ithaca year round



700 people experiencing or at risk of homelessness die each year of hypothermia



Overall, homelessness has become a growing issue in Ithaca, NY and with homelessness comes many other risks to a person's well-being.

One major issue the homeless population in New York state, and Ithaca specifically, faces is health risks caused by cold, bitter temperatures during winter months.

A [2010 report](#) from the National Coalition for the Homeless disclosed that 700 people experiencing or at risk of being homeless die from hypothermia annually in the United States. It also stated that 44 percent of the nation's homeless are unsheltered.

In order to combat the health risks cold weather can cause for the homeless, in 2016, New York State Governor, Andrew Cuomo, issued an [executive order](#) requiring local state governments to provide shelter for the homeless when temperatures reach 32 degrees or

below. A [Code Blue Alert](#) is declared when temperatures reach 32 degrees or below or when wind chill reaches zero degrees Fahrenheit, in order to mitigate dangerous conditions to the homeless population.

The purpose of this executive order was to protect New York state's growing homeless population during the winter months. Under this executive order, the state also affirmed that they would help local districts who lack the resources, facilities or expertise to abide by this order.

As a means to measure how many people are homeless within a community, a point-in-time count is taken. A point-in-time count is a count taken on a single night of the people in a given community who are experiencing homelessness. This count includes both sheltered and unsheltered people. The most recent numbers from January 2018, recorded by the Tompkins County Street Outreach Team, show that during a two-day period at the end of January, 91 people were experiencing homelessness in Tompkins County. This means 91 people were found either unsheltered, in transitional housing or in emergency shelters; 91 people all lacked a permanent place to call home.

In order to ensure that Tompkins County is following New York state's cold weather policy, The Department of Social Services (DSS) works to enforce the regulations throughout the community. The community outreach team, which is composed of five individuals under the direction of DSS, goes out weekly to the Jungle and other designated areas downtown during the winter months to let homeless individuals know that housing is available under cold weather policy.

Program Development Specialist at Tompkins County Department of Social Services, Deana Bodnar, said she believes that with the help of the Community Outreach team, Ithaca does an adequate job abiding by cold weather policy.

"I would say the outreach team goes above and beyond what other community outreach teams do," Bodnar said.

Bodnar said when temperatures get extremely bitter, DSS encourages the Outreach team to go out to the Jungle and other areas where the homeless reside more than usual. She said during the times when weather is 20 degrees Fahrenheit or below, an extra effort is made.

Problems with the Cold Weather Policy in Place

However, Dejesus said he believes despite Cuomo's executive order and the work of Tompkins County DSS, a major issue with the policies in place to protect the homeless population stem from the utilization of the point-in-time-count. He said he disagrees with the number of homeless people in Tompkins County for 2018 that was portrayed through this count. He said at given times he has seen at least 50 to 60 people who lack permanent residence in the Jungle. He also said if there was a more accurate representation of how many people are homeless in Ithaca, then the community would potentially do more to address the issue.

Dejesus said he believes one way in which policies could be addressed to better buckle down on homelessness, especially in the winter months, is through shelters providing services once temperatures reach 40 or 50 degrees Fahrenheit. He said he believes that shelters solely providing shelter once temperatures reach 32 degrees Fahrenheit or below is inadequate.

With this in mind, studies, along with the National Coalition for the Homeless, show there are problems with this cold weather policy in New York State. It does not account for the fact that hypothermia can kick in when temperatures drop below just 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Therefore, it has been concluded by [The National Coalition for the Homeless](#) that requiring local governments to provide shelter for those once temperatures reach 32 degrees or below does not completely help to prevent cold-weather induced illnesses and protect the expanding homeless population.

Rick Brown, Communications Manager at the National Healthcare for the Homeless Council, said despite cold weather policies, cold weather during the winter months continues to affect the health of those who are homeless.

"Cold weather is really a critical threat," Brown said. "It's an important cause of death and injury for people without homes and it's something that we've been aware of for some time."

He said cold weather simply augments other risks that the homeless population encounters.

"We really do know that cold weather can exacerbate people's health struggles," Brown said. "It's already difficult to manage things like chronic illness on the streets or even to access healthcare, but it makes it that much more difficult the existing issues our homeless populations are facing."

Additionally many homeless people suffer from a lack of adequate clothing necessary for cold temperatures. In many cases, they also lack access to full, healthy meals causing them to suffer from malnutrition. These are two factors that increase the risk of hypothermia.

Hypothermia can occur when a body begins to lose heat faster than it can produce it. The normal body temperature is 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. Once a body temperature drops to 95 degrees Fahrenheit hypothermia can set in. Although most cases of hypothermia occur in air temperatures

between [30 to 40 degrees Fahrenheit](#), hypothermia can kick in at 60 or 70 degrees Fahrenheit as well. According to [University of Pittsburgh Medical Care](#), as the body becomes colder, brain activity subsequently slows down. With this, sleepiness and confusion kicks in, leaving the individual unable to make good judgements. Shivering begins, skin becomes paler and goosebumps gradually form. Eventually slurred speech, fatigue and memory loss become symptoms that require medical assistance. Additional symptoms of hypothermia include hunger, nausea, shallow breathing, a weak pulse and an increased heart rate.

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless Council, homeless people are thus three to six times more likely to become ill in comparison to people who are permanently housed.

Obstacles with Getting an Apartment

During the cold winter months, several hotels and churches in Tompkins County take in homeless people as part of Cuomo's cold weather policy. The overnight shelter these hotels provide for these people comes out of state expenditures.

After suffering from problems with his liver, Dejesus got moved from the Jungle to a local hospital where he stayed a month and a half. Although he was still in pain, the hospital told him he would have to pay \$1,000 a day to stay. Through DSS, he then got moved to a hotel where he stayed for three months.

Now, after a long, tedious application process, Dejesus has found a form of permanent residence through Section 8 of the housing authority; an apartment at Towers View.

"It took almost six months to get (the apartment), I mean they had rooms but I wasn't moving in with the drugs and all that," Dejesus said. "It's a pretty nice studio room."

Dejesus is able to get an apartment with the help of Section 8. [Section 8](#), also known as the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV), funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, is a subsidized housing program which allows low-income individuals to rent housing through the help of federal funds given to the Ithaca Housing Authority. Under HCV, a family is prohibited from paying more than 40 percent of their income while signing the initial lease.

Despite programs like HCV, finding an adequate apartment or an affordable place to live in Ithaca continues to be difficult.

Dejesus said DSS will help individuals lacking permanent residence find an apartment, but most of the time they do find a place, it is a place in an environment that is unhealthy. He said in his experience, many times these apartments are places filled with drugs, so people turn them down and decide to just stay outside.

"DSS will put you with slum landlords," Dejesus said. "The bathrooms are nasty, the kitchens the bedrooms and they hardly have heat... there are people doing drugs in the hallways."

Problems with Shelters in Tompkins County

Deb Lockwood, an active volunteer who works to try to address the homeless crisis in Ithaca, additionally said she believes Ithaca has services for the homeless, however, she also said she thinks they can do more.

Lockwood said that many shelters in Ithaca do not have the means to best accommodate the increasing influx of homeless people looking for shelter.

She said she, along with other volunteers, believe with the money being spent to address cold weather policy, Tompkins County could simply build more shelters, for if not the same, less money than housing people in hotels currently costs.

Lockwood said that if you put 150 people into a hotel, starting at \$100 per night and for several months, the cost of these services become astronomical. She believes that with the money being spent to allow homeless people to seek shelter from local hotels, the city could build, with the help of volunteer hours and materials, adequate places for as little as \$1,500.

She believes that if funding were to be allocated to building developments, it would not only benefit the homeless population, but the whole community of Tompkins County.

"If funding could be used on a designated area to make a little development it would be better for everyone," Lockwood said. "I mean I understand their hands are tied because this is an order from the state, it's not Tompkins County money, its not part of their budget, they're just the intermediary facilitating it."

Lockwood also said although DSS does go out into the community to let individuals know shelters are available, many homeless people still decide to turn the shelters down. Many of these individuals are recovering from alcohol and drug abuse. Due to this, they need their own space and mentally cannot be crammed and sleep in such tight quarters.

"A reason why people don't seek cold weather or shelters, they can't be in those environments," Lockwood said. "It's mats and cots just lined up and when you're dealing with mental health issues and a lot of complicating factors it's not something they can do."

Dejesus said aside from him feeling like there are not enough shelters in Ithaca, a major issue he has experienced with the shelters available during the winter months is the shelters have only 21 rooms and the rest of the individuals sleep on cots or in the hallways. He said many individuals, including himself, would rather stay outside, than stay in such an environment. He also said another issue that the population faces is that they cannot be in an environment where drugs are present. Having just recovered from liver problems, Dejesus would rather stay outside than be surrounded by people with addictions.

"All the shelters are filled with drugs," Dejesus said. "Why people don't go? It's because they don't want to be in that environment."

Lockwood said the Jungle offers these individuals more freedom if they suffer from mental health issues. They don't have to abide by rules and regulations that are imposed within the shelters. She also said that often times the shelters make group meetings mandatory, which many individuals are uncomfortable with.

Brown also said that a lack of an adequate number of beds in these shelters along with the fact that shelters will only provide services once temperatures reach below 32 degrees Fahrenheit are major concerns when it comes to adequately creating services for homeless communities.

"Not only sometimes is it difficult for people to be admitted into shelters, but also it can be difficult to find adequate shelter, especially in certain districts," Brown said. "It really is critical that we find more beds and more easily accessible beds in these services; one of the issues also is that over 70 percent of organizations that respond to people have temperature specific cut-offs for their winter services."

Solutions

Ultimately, Brown believes change and ultimately solutions will begin with enacting stronger, more comprehensive policies, nationally.

“The solution to this is going to be finding the political will to end homelessness, because we know that providing adequate housing and healthcare that we can prevent this,” Brown said. “...but until such time that we do it’s really critical local communities implement timely strategies and winter response plans, it’s really more critical now than ever.”

The Next Step for Tompkins County

This spring a dewatering facility construction will be built just behind the gate, where part of the Jungle is. This facility is an integral part of [the dredging of Ithaca's flood control channel](#). When the channel was built in 1965, it was able to hold a great volume of water, and significantly reduce damage from floods. However, due to sediment build up the channel cannot hold nearly as much water today. Consequently, by May 1, all individuals who rely on the Jungle as their source of permanent residence will be forced to look elsewhere for a place to stay, as the city begins this dredging project.

The one place many individuals consider a place of safety will be stripped from them. Dejesus and his neighbor in the Jungle, Ozzie, are just two individuals whose place of residence will ultimately have to be moved or destroyed due to this intensive project.

An emergency hotline telephone number provided by DSS can be called at 273-9177 for those experiencing homelessness and in need of emergency assistance.