

City winter shelter opens doors to women and children

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For the last four years, the Lancaster city houses of worship which have opened their doors to the homeless during the winter have hosted mostly men.

Of the 50 cots or mats which have been available, 40 of those have been reserved for men. This year, that changes.

When the doors open Sunday night at St. James Episcopal Church, it will be for women and children.

The temporary winter shelter, which is hosted by a different city location each week through March, acts as an overflow shelter when the year-round emergency shelters are full.

That time is now.

Daral Boles, director of the Women & Families program at [the Water Street Mission](#), said the women's shelter, 210 S. Prince St., has been full for months.

"That's the population that is most fragile and vulnerable and that's the population that we really need to have a place for," Boles said of women and children.

The temporary winter shelter can house 50 women and children, including boys under age 12, said Gretchen Lichy, assistant director of the Lancaster County Council of Churches, which organizes the shelter.

The decision to allow women and children in the winter shelter comes after the Water Street Mission purchased 60 mats and opened the doors of its chapel at night to men. The Community Shelter program simply offers a warm place to stay. Another 42 beds are available at the mission's men's shelter, where men receive basic services and can be further directed to programs for job training or drug and alcohol rehabilitation.

Adding the mats at the mission chapel also came after the Crispus Attucks Community Center announced it was closing its emergency homeless shelter. That 20-bed shelter closed at the end of June.

With the changes, there was a net increase of 20 beds for men and 20 for women and children at the mission.

The continuing economic recession could affect the shelter population this winter, said Aaron Eggers, Water Street Mission's director of men's ministries.

There are many people who are on the verge of homelessness, Eggers said.

Boles said she believes there are many who are already homeless who have not yet shown up at the shelters. They may be "nesting," or staying with family members or friends.

Those families may come to the shelters if a landlord learns that two families are staying in an apartment, she said.

Yet, she said, "People are resourceful, particularly mothers with children," Boles said. "If they can't get in here, they're on the street and they lose their children. That's a great motivator for a mother," Boles said.

The winter shelter continues through March 29.

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