

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES



Office of the Director

December 24, 2020

Transmitted via Email

Amber Gove Chair
Advisory Neighborhood Commission 6A

Dear Chairperson Gove:

Thank you for your letter dated November 13, 2020 and apologies for our slow reply. We appreciate the opportunity to meet with ANC 6A on November 12 and remain committed to working with the community to protect the safety of all residents.

As you know, since our conversation we have opened Sherwood Rec Center as a hypothermia shelter. DHS staff member Melvyn Smith (melvyn.smith2@dc.gov) remains the appropriate POC to address and respond to operational issues and I know members of the ANC have already been in touch with him directly.

In response to ANC 6A's recommendation that the District government seek every available opportunity to provide apartment-style or hotel room housing to the unhoused residents this winter, we wanted to share the following chart which summarizes the type of shelter the District is using this winter.

Shelter for Unaccompanied Adults by Type – Winter 2020-2021			
Type of shelter	Total Capacity	Percent of Capacity	Notes
Hotels	692	35.5%	Reserved for most medically vulnerable.
Recreation Centers	300	15.5%	Operating with COVID protections in place.
Year Round low-barrier shelter	810	41.5%	Operating at reduced capacity. Normal year-round capacity is 1243.
Other added capacity	147	7.5%	Includes former day center space, nongovernment buildings, etc.
TOTAL	1949	100%	

As you can see, Rec Centers account for approximately 15% of our overall portfolio whereas hotels account for 35%. We continue to use Rec Centers for hypothermia sites, whereas hotels are reserved for a program called the Pandemic Emergency Program for Highly Vulnerable Individuals (PEP-V), which is a program for individuals residing in DC shelters or unsheltered individuals who are thought to have the highest risk factors should they contract COVID-19, including advanced age and underlying health conditions.

Below, please find answers to your specific questions regarding the Rec Center operations.

First, the Commission requests that any plans to use facilities within our bounds be fully vetted by career public health staff at the Department of Health to ensure that maximum capacity, socially distancing, airflow, and other key health requirements for gatherings during the pandemic are fully considered from a public health and safety perspective by experts in this area.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, DHS has worked with DC Health and other partners to ensure that our operational plans in emergency shelter are consistent with public health guidance. This was true when DHS designed the guidance to providers for the use of Rec Centers as hypothermia sites. Specifically, DHS sent the plans to the DC Health Division of Epidemiology who signed off. We remained in contact with DC Health, and specifically the Division of Epidemiology, on a regular near-daily basis to coordinate procedures around contact tracing, mass testing, and to respond to ad hoc situations that relate to COVID and require public health decision-making.

Second, the District should ensure that any such Recreation Centers have adequately upgraded their HVAC units to allow for improved filtering of airflow. The District is in the process of doing for its public schools prior to returning a small number of children to classrooms. Our unhoused residents deserve similar protections if they are going to be brought inside and congregated for extended periods of time with other non family members. The Commission strongly urges that any Recreation Centers that are used to house groups of individuals this winter have HVAC upgrades and improved airflow to meet or exceed those being provided throughout D.C. Public Schools, including MERV-14 and HEPA filters.

To date, the District has installed approximately 185 mobile HEPA units in all 5 hypothermia shelters. In addition, we are actively procuring an additional 811 units which will cover the entire shelter portfolio (Short Term Family Housing (STFH), Low Barrier, Permanent Support Housing etc.). The District aims to complete the installation by the end of January for the aforementioned portfolio, with the units arriving on a rolling delivery schedule. Providing mobile HEPA units is proven to be an easier and more effective solution than installing the highest MERV filter(which is in the existing HVAC system) for a facility. especially under short notice i.e. the current Coronavirus pandemic. Lastly, DGS has installed 98 units within the STFH portfolio as of December 18th.

Third, the District should respect the need for social distancing to combat the pandemic and protect the safety of its residents by substantially reducing capacity below levels used in prior years. Last year, DHS placed 30 beds inside Sherwood Recreation Center on hypothermia alert nights. Given the complications involved in social distancing during the pandemic and the particularized importance of social distancing during extended time indoors with non family

members, the Commission urges the DHS to reduce capacity to no greater than 50 percent of the number of residents who used the facility last year. As District schools are considering reopening, they are all proposing to operate as substantially reduced capacities during the pandemic. The vulnerable residents that DHS serves during hypothermia season and those who serve them and otherwise come into close contact with them, deserve no less.

Consistent with the advice of public health officials, potential capacity numbers are chosen based on the specifications of the physical space and not on past usage. Based on space considerations alone, Sherwood Rec Center has a non-COVID capacity for 100 individuals. Your letter is correct that in the past several years, DHS hosted a smaller number of women at that site, maxing out at 30 during the 2019 Winter Season. The Department arrived at that number in an effort to be responsive to community needs regarding the impact to neighbors – however, that choice was grounded in the projected need of residents experiencing homelessness relative to existing capacity in shelters. This year, we recognize that the community has similar concerns but due to the public health emergency we have a greater need combined with limited capacity across our system. Therefore, to meet the projections built into the Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH) Winter Plan, we will operate the site for 60 women, which is approximate 66% of possible capacity.

I hope this information is clarifying and helpful as we move forward in continued partnership through this Hypothermia Season. As noted above, we remain committed to working with the ANC to address and respond to operational issues.

Thank you for your engagement,

Laura Green Zeilinger

Laura Green Zeilinger, Director

CC: Keith Anderson, Director DGS
Chairman Phil Mendelson
Councilmember Brianne Nadeau
Councilmember Charles Allen