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Thursday, November 21, 2013

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## Building, fire codes add to challenge of aiding Fairfax's homeless in cold months

*Building restrictions prevent some houses of worship from participating in emergency shelter program*

By Kali Schumitz Staff Writer

Fairfax County has had success in preventing deaths from hypothermia since it launched a community partnership eight years ago to get homeless people indoors on frigid nights.

However, state building and fire codes are making it more challenging for the county and its nonprofit partners to find locations to use as emergency shelter spaces.

Through the program, houses of worship allow their buildings to be used as emergency shelters, under the guidance of the nonprofit organizations that run the county's standard homeless shelters. They also often provide volunteers to prepare meals for the homeless guests.

However, last year, county code enforcement officials determined that some of those buildings don't meet the criteria for serving as sleeping quarters. For example, they might not have sprinkler systems or the correct type of smoke alarms.

As a result, some houses of worship could no longer participate in the program, and others had restrictions placed on the number of occupants or the number of days they could participate in the program. Any facility without sprinklers can only serve as a shelter for a total of 14 days over the course of the hypothermia season, which begins this weekend and continues through March.



Shamus Ian Fatzinger/Fairfax County Times  
Beth Jones serves as senior program director at the Bailey's Crossroads Community Shelter.

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about half the people expected when the Baileys Crossroads portion of the program begins Dec. 1.

Dean Klein, director of the Fairfax County Office to Prevent and End Homelessness, said the county is working with its nonprofit partners, as well as the code enforcement agencies, to continue to find spaces to serve as emergency shelter.

"There is really a sense of collaboration, which is necessary to make sure we are successful," he said.

The county will have about 45 sites this year, but more locations are still needed, he said.

"We are confident that we are going to have adequate sites to operate the program with the capacity that we need,"

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Klein said.

The county served 1,078 individuals over the course of the 2013-2013 winter and is planning for about the same numbers this year.

Jones said she and other nonprofit leaders are committed to finding solutions, even if it means driving clients halfway across the county to find them a place for the night.

"We will use whatever we can to make sure people stay alive. That is the No. 1 priority," she said.

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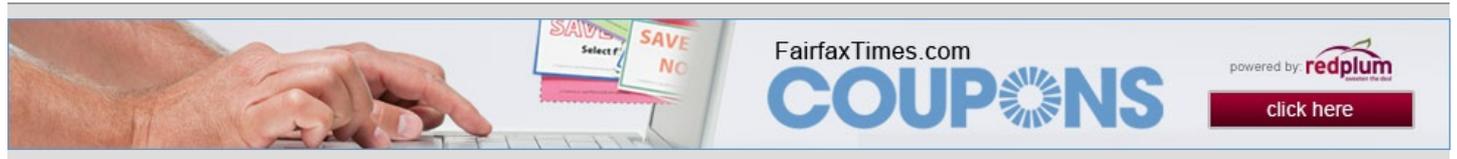
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