



JOINT OFFICE OF HOMELESS SERVICES

No one will be turned away: Preparing our response for severe winter weather

For the hundreds of neighbors in Multnomah County living without shelter, even just a single day or night of severe winter weather – including high winds, and snow, sleet and ice – is **a life-threatening event that requires an emergency response**. The danger grows as conditions linger.

That’s why, no matter how many days of severe weather we might see, the Joint Office of Homeless Services and Multnomah County’s and Portland’s emergency management officials all share a rapid-response plan that can scale up to provide the needed response. The plan is centered on a basic commitment: **No one who needs a warm, dry place will be turned away**.

On the busiest night during last year’s crisis, outreach providers and first responders worked with the Joint Office and scores of volunteers and community-based organizations to help nearly 750 people escape the cold, with room to spare. Those crisis spaces were in addition to the more than 1,500 year-round and winter beds already in our community.

The Joint Office and Emergency Management works closely with service providers as well as first responders and partners in Multnomah County, Portland and Gresham. They also rely on the support of community groups, residents and other government agencies.

WHEN THE PLAN TAKES EFFECT

The Joint Office declares a severe weather event whenever any of the following conditions are met:

- Temperatures forecast at 25°F or below
- Forecasts predict at least an inch of snow in most areas
- Overnight temperatures forecast at 32°F or below, with at least an inch of driving rain
- Other conditions, including severe wind chills or extreme temperature fluctuations

The Joint Office continuously monitors National Weather Service forecasts for downtown Portland (97204), Portland International Airport (97218) and Troutdale (97060). If any meet the thresholds for severe weather, the Joint Office notifies Multnomah County’s communications office and 211info, which alerts service providers, first responders and community members who’ve requested notice.

The alerts list available night and day shelters, alongside details on transportation. On days that fall short of the thresholds for emergency response, the Joint Office may still send alerts about services.

HOW THE RESPONSE WORKS

The response builds in orchestrated ways, depending on the severity of conditions, how long they’re expected to last, and where they’re occurring. Severity levels can escalate quickly if conditions change.

First-level response: Three days or less of severe weather

- The Joint Office’s contracted severe weather shelter provider, Transition Projects, initially opens one or more shelters, with hundreds of beds at the ready. Locations include Imago

Dei in southeast Portland, the Bud Clark Commons in downtown Portland, and a shelter in Gresham. Shelters are low-barrier, with space for carts and bikes, and access for pets. Community partners may also open spaces if needed.

- The Joint Office works with 211Info, TriMet, outreach providers, first responders and taxi companies to coordinate transportation of people and supplies to warming centers, and also to distribute cold weather gear to those who choose not to come to shelter.
- Trained volunteers fill shifts at warming centers as needed.
- 211 serves as the information hub for shelter, transportation, gear and volunteer needs.
- The Joint Office convenes a daily call of first responders, outreach providers and shelter providers to monitor shelter capacity and assist in logistics coordination.

Second-level response: Four or more consecutive days of severe weather

- The response grows to a 24-hour operation, both for the Joint Office and 211. Multnomah County's emergency management department assigns a liaison to support the response.
- All Level 1 responses continue, including ongoing expansion of shelter capacity as needed.

Third-level response: Extreme and/or extended severe weather

- All Level 1 and Level 2 responses remain in effect. Emergency management officials assist in coordinating transportation resources to ensure vulnerable neighbors continue to be moved to shelter, staff and volunteers reach warming centers, warming center supplies are delivered in timely fashion, and cold weather gear can get to anyone still refusing shelter.
- As more shelter capacity is needed, emergency management officials use their resources to support all aspects of managing that expansion. Public buildings may open.
- Government workers are enlisted to expand the response and relieve volunteers and staffers who have been working for days.
- Because it can be challenging to move people from nighttime warming centers to day spaces and back, certain nighttime warming centers may remain open during the day.

DON'T WAIT FOR SEVERE WEATHER TO START HELPING!

To volunteer: Transition Projects is providing special 90-minute training sessions for adults 18 and older interested in volunteering at a severe weather warming center. **Go to 211info.org to sign up.**

Volunteers will do hands-on work and should be comfortable working with people experiencing homelessness. These active shifts take place on the coldest nights of the year, so having reliable transportation in inclement weather is important.

To donate: Outreach providers need winter gear they can pass out now, so folks outside are ready for the cold, and to have in reserve during an emergency. Having the right gear staged in the right places before a crisis will help providers better focus on direct services and life-saving efforts in the moment.

Needed items include **warm socks, waterproof gloves or mittens, waterproof winter coats, sleeping bags and warm blankets, fleece hats, tarps, hand warmers, and rain ponchos.**

For drop-off locations and other tips, **call 211 or go to 211info.org.**