

Austin / Travis County Continuum of Care (TX-503)

Written Standards for Emergency Shelter Program Delivery & Best Practices for Inclement Weather Shelter



Revised June 10th 2024 by Crisis Response Committee

Emergency Shelter & Inclement Weather Shelter

Emergency Shelter interventions provide immediate, low-barrier shelter options for people experiencing homelessness who are unable to immediately access permanent housing. Emergency Shelters must support a flow from housing crisis to housing stability by identifying and assisting households facing crises with rapid and effective permanent housing connections.

Inclement Weather Shelter (IWS) aims to shelter all individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness during inclement weather events. IWS is required to follow all applicable Emergency Shelter standards. Specific IWS standards are outlined in the Inclement Weather Shelter portion of this document.

Note: The Austin / Travis County Continuum of Care provides these written standards as reference for providers operating Emergency Shelter programs. These written standards support but do not supersede the written standards, policies, and procedures maintained or stipulated by program funders unless otherwise stated by those funders. Funders of emergency shelter programs are welcome to stipulate that providers follow these Austin / Travis County Continuum of Care written standards for emergency shelter.

Background

According to [guidance from USICH](#), Emergency Shelters, including IWS, are expected to strive for continuous improvement in the following specific areas to strengthen the implementation and impact of emergency shelter programs:

- Promote dignity and respect for every person seeking or needing shelter,
- Divert people from the homelessness service system, when possible,
- Create low-barrier access to shelter, removing exclusionary criteria, such as criminal history, substance use or treatment engagement.
- Incorporate Housing Focused Shelter approaches, including focus on assessment and triage, and intentionally linking to permanent housing resources through individualized housing plans.
- Equip emergency shelters to serve as a platform for housing access.

Population

- All served in emergency shelter must qualify as homeless under paragraphs (1) and (4) of the “homeless” definition under 24 CFR § 576.2.

Population Specialization

- Emergency Shelters may have specific target populations to address the unique needs and concerns of those populations. If an emergency shelter designates a specific target population, they cannot deny individuals or families who meet the subpopulation guidelines so long as the capacity exists to serve them.

Prioritization

- All shelters must transparently and publicly post their Prioritization Policy, including any additional policies by which they prioritize their beds and services
- If beds cannot be provided for all people desiring shelter, admission to shelter should, as much as possible, be prioritized in ways that are guided by transparent, objective measures created by funders and community feedback.

Minimum Standards

- ES must follow LOW BARRIER guidelines and practices for households to access and enter shelter. Specific to shelter, this includes:
 - Ensuring access and enrollment to shelter and services follow local and federal nondiscrimination policies such as the Equal Access Rule.
 - Allowing access and placing all persons based on self-identification of gender. Single-gender shelters must not require proof of gender for an individual to enter shelter.
 - Being free of charge. ES must not require participants to pay a fee to enter the shelter or utilize its services.
 - Not creating barriers to shelter such as requiring testing and/or sobriety, requiring income, criminal history restrictions, requiring medication adherence, or mandating participation in mental health treatment, unless required by the funding source.
 - ES reserved for families must not require that families separate to enter shelter and must not deny admission to families with minor children based upon the composition of the family in accordance with Section 404 of the McKinney-Vento Act as amended by the Hearth Act.
- ES must offer on-site facilities and resources to meet basic needs & population-specific needs.
 - Meals: Shelter clients must be provided with meals that meet a 2,000-calorie-per-day diet and comply with the Health & Human

Services Dietary Guidelines for Americans¹. Clients must be provided with the option to specify dietary restrictions upon intake. All food must be prepared and served by someone with a Food Handler's License.

- Adequate linens and bedding: cots/beds/mats, blankets, and towels must be provided.
- Hygiene facilities: must be clean and meet the capacity of 1 shower and one commode for 15 shelter clients.²
- Laundry: Laundry service must be provided to control pathogens and infestations within the shelter environment. Guests must be able to wash clothing and bed linens in a clean facility at least once per week.
- Personal care items, including hygiene products and undergarments.
- Locking storage: To prevent theft and subsequent negative exits, locking storage must be made available to all shelter guests.
- Essential life-saving equipment: First Aid Kit, AED, Narcan/Naloxone, biohazard waste disposal (e.g. sharps disposal).

Emergency Shelter Supportive Services

- ES must offer the following services directly:
 - Case management or service coordination, driven by a housing plan, written collaboratively with the client, that outlines accountability.
 - Diversion and Rapid Exit screening and services
 - Coordinated Assessment & housing navigation
 - Entitlement benefits assistance (SNAP, MAP, SSI/SSDI)
- ES must offer access to the following services either directly or through partner agreements of referrals:
 - Medical care
 - Psychiatric care
 - Substance abuse care and harm reduction resources
 - Crisis intervention and safety planning

¹<https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov>

²<https://www.dshs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/foodestablishments/pdf/GuidanceDocs/Emergency-Shelter-Recommendations.pdf>

Essential Elements

- All shelter staff must receive training in:
 - CPR & First Aid
 - Opioid poisoning reversal
 - Bloodborne Pathogen
 - Cultural competency
 - Anti-racism
 - Trauma Informed Care
 - De-escalation techniques
- ES supportive services staff must receive additional training in:
 - Harm Reduction
 - Strength-based strategies
 - Problem-solving interventions

Timeframe

- Emergency Shelter - Intended for short-term (days or months) stays. Time limits are left to the discretion of the individual shelters but must be clearly communicated to all clients upon entry into the shelter.
- Inclement Weather - Intended for short-term (hours, days, weeks) stays, and shall last and be kept open for the duration that it has been determined to be dangerous or life-threatening staying outdoors due to extreme cold weather events. Time limits are left to the discretion of the individual shelters but must be clearly communicated to all clients upon entry into the shelter.

Documentation

- ES provider(s) must enter service delivery data into HMIS or a comparable database for Victim Service Provider agencies, following HMIS Data Standards. The BOLO list must be checked at all registrations/entry.
- Follow HUD requirements under 24 CFR § 576.400(e) related to emergency shelters and essential services.
- Emergency Shelters must establish a Language Access Plan in order to ensure that participants with limited English proficiency have meaningful and equitable access to all programs, services, and resources that the shelter provides.
- ES must have appropriate, clear and up-to-date policies and Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) established and in place for their agency and each unit, program, and division operating as part of or in conjunction with the shelter.

- ES must review their agency's SOP and all policies and procedures at least once per year to ensure services and practices are relevant.
- ES must establish the following policies and procedures:
 - [Limited English Proficiency](#) (LEP) guidance.
 - Grievance Policy and related forms. These forms and policy must be publicly posted on site and on the organization's website, and copies of forms must be readily available without the client needing to request them.
 - Exit rules and policies
 - Reasonable Accommodation guidance, in accordance with [Fair Housing Act](#).
- The above-listed policies and procedures must be provided in accordance with [Limited English Proficiency](#) (LEP) guidance before intake. They must be visible and publicly posted for all persons to reference at any time.
- ES must be transparent about admission and exit policies.
- ES must hold in-depth reviews of their shelter rules at least once per year to maintain and ensure client-focused goals and outcomes. Shelter clients should be required to participate in each review and should be established in agency policy and procedures (See Further Guidance).

Inclement Weather Shelter Best Practices

The primary goal of Inclement Weather Shelter (IWS) is to provide immediate, low-barrier shelter options for people living unsheltered who are at immediate risk of significant physical harm/injury or death (e.g., hypothermia, heat stroke) due to extreme weather events. The City of Austin's Homeland Security and Emergency Management Department defines the threshold of mandatory Cold Weather Shelter activation. Emergency Shelter Best Practices include recommendations and guidance for shelters which prefer to maintain activation beyond the city thresholds.

IWS will comply with all written standards as set for Emergency Shelter, in addition to the following:

- IWS must be well-advertised (e.g., via online, phone/text alerts, & in person locations) in a timely manner and outline specific criteria under which IWS will activate, formally outlined in writing and distributed at least once annually, or whenever any relevant info is updated, among all stakeholders.
- IWS registration & entry points shall be de-centralized to the maximum extent possible, with multiple in person, phone, and/or virtual registration/entry options made available.

- Transportation to CWS should be made available to all participants free of charge. Reasonable amount of outreach efforts shall be made to ensure those who cannot access mainstream transportation services (e.g., CapMetro bus system) on their own can still access CWS.
- IWS must ensure no households are turned away at entry, except for when shelter locations reach capacity, in which case every possible effort must be made to ensure alternative shelter options are made available immediately (e.g., hotel vouchers, shelter-in-place supplies, diversion/rapid exit).
- IWS must make commonly used resources and referral information available to shelter clients, such as how to obtain a coordinated assessment and lists of reliable resource centers and service access points.
- IWS is exempt from case management and coordinated assessment being a mandatory service, though this is recommended as a best practice.

Further Guidance

- HUD Exchange [Emerging Practices for Congregate Emergency Shelter](#)
- **Guidelines for Periodic Reviews of Shelter Rules:** The Austin / Travis County CoC strongly recommends using the best practices from the [National Alliance to End Homelessness \(NAEH\)'s 10 Steps to Evaluation Shelter Rules](#).
- **Minimum Facility Recommendations:** [Texas State Health and Human Service Commission Emergency Shelter Recommendations](#)
- [National Alliance to End Homelessness: Reimagining Interim Housing](#).
- [Best Practices in Interagency Collaboration Brief Series](#)