



Tacoma Pierce County Coalition to End Homelessness

<https://pchomeless.org/> - info@pchomeless.org

January 29th, 2021

To: Pierce County Emergency Management and the Tacoma Pierce County Health Department
From: Tacoma Pierce County Coalition to End Homelessness

Concerns with Temporary Care Center Policies and Procedures

The Temporary Care Center must begin serving every individual exposed to or positive for Covid-19 who has no safe place to isolate or quarantine. The current Temporary Care Center, a repurposed hotel with up to 120 non-congregate rooms is very well suited to this task. Unfortunately, admission and conduct policies prevent the site from serving everyone who needs this service. These policies must change.

The Homeless System is designed to serve the actual need. Shelter providers choose – and are usually mandated by our funders – to serve every individual in need. When they show up at the door, every effort is made to serve them because shelter is a human right. If you struggle with substance use, you deserve shelter. If you are living with a mental illness, you deserve shelter. If you are a smoker, you deserve shelter. If you have a criminal conviction, you deserve shelter. Everyone deserves shelter.

Unfortunately, the Tacoma Pierce County Health Department and Pierce County Emergency Management are not adhering to this philosophy that everyone deserves shelter. Congregate shelter is not a safe option for people exposed to or positive for COVID-19 – they cannot stay in homeless shelters in Pierce County. Every shelter could get funded to operate their own isolation and quarantine facility, but that would be extraordinarily expensive and a massively inefficient way to meet need. Like most communities in the country, Pierce County established a Temporary Care Center. However, that facility blocks entry for people who would be best served at the Temporary Care Center but are apparently too inconvenient to shelter. These people in need of quarantine or isolation have nearly no other option for safe shelter. Yes, sometimes they are transported to King County – to facilities that do serve everyone. And sometimes shelters are able to scrounge together funding for a temporary motel stay. Sadly though, most of these people are forced onto the streets.

A couple who were COVID-19 positive were denied entry because of prescription medication used to treat mental health. No behavior issues were jeopardizing their safety or the safety of other shelter guests at the congregate shelter where they had been staying prior to their positive tests. But they had a behavioral health issue that was deemed beyond what the Temporary Care Center was willing to serve. In the world of disability advocacy, and probably in the eyes of the Department of Justice, that is discrimination. Probably illegal discrimination against a protected class. Another protected class experiencing discrimination is people of color. While overt racism is unusual, the decision to bar people with a violent criminal history is a clear indicator that Temporary Care Center policies were developed with little understanding of the impacts of systemic racism. And the Tacoma Pierce County Health Department's disdain for smokers is well understood; they have been barred from employment at the Health Department for years. It is then of little surprise that they extend that condescension to denying them shelter – a basic human right. Not surprising, but utterly unacceptable.



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It is puzzling this needs to be explained to the Health Department, but alcoholism and other substance use disorders are chronic health conditions. Harm reduction program models with available services are the standard at area shelters. The Temporary Care Center must adopt the harm reduction model as well.

In normal times, a hotel rents rooms to guests with substance use struggles, guests actively managing mental health conditions, guests who smoke and guests with criminal backgrounds. All those people stay in hotels because it is safe for them to be there. Hotels do not screen for those situations because those situations generally do not cause problems. There is no reason a hotel used for isolation and quarantine should need to operate any differently.

The Temporary Care Center has failed our community. By all reports it is adequately funded, adequately staffed, and physically laid out to serve our community need well. But beds sit empty, at a monthly cost probably north of \$1M. With an adequate facility and adequate funding, it is simply a choice to only serve those guests deemed convenient. This Temporary Care Center has a mission that cannot prioritize convenience; lives are at stake.

It is hard to run a homeless shelter in 2021. When a client tests positive at the shelter, immediate isolation and quarantine are needed. What should require a single call to the Temporary Care Center and a vehicle dispatched for pickup, instead initiates a string of phone calls and screenings and transport of a potential client not to the Temporary Care Facility, but to a primary care physician or urgent care to do a health evaluation mandated before entry to the Temporary Care Center. There are worse ideas than sending a confirmed COVID-19 patient to the waiting room of the emergency room to get their blood pressure taken, but not many. Clients and shelter staff describe the experience of trying to get into the Temporary Care Center and the experience of staying in the Temporary Care Center as agonizing and dehumanizing. The goal should be trauma informed care, not trauma inducing care.

An immediate isolation or quarantine option needs to be available not just to clients staying at a shelter, but to people experiencing homelessness in encampments, safe parking sites, being discharged from urgent care clinics and emergency rooms. It must be as simple to access isolation or quarantine as it is to access an emergency room.

Homeless Shelter providers and people experiencing homelessness need a trauma informed, harm reduction, everyone welcome Temporary Care Center. While we expect the Health Department and Emergency Management to take ownership of running such a facility, they need not do so alone. The provider community and the people we serve are available to assist with designing policies and procedures that will meet the needs of all people experiencing homelessness.

While the Temporary Care Center is under the supervision of the Pierce County Emergency Management Department, it is deplorable that when alerted to these deficiencies, other government agencies have publicly stood silent while our neighbors experiencing homelessness are unethically and possibly illegally denied the shelter they need in order to survive. The voice of elected representatives and governmental partners in public discourse has power; use it.



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The Tacoma Pierce County Health Department and the Pierce County Department of Emergency Management must take responsibility for sheltering all people exposed to or positive for COVID-19. All people. Someone who tested positive for COVID-19 and is also a smoker, which is to say someone with diminished lung capacity and a disease that can further damage lungs, belongs inside. Instead, they are pushed to the streets. We expect better of the Pierce County Health Department and Pierce County Emergency Management. The lives of our most vulnerable neighbors, as well as our community as a whole depends upon it.

Sincerely,

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CC Pierce County Executive
 Pierce County Council
 Tacoma Pierce County Health Department Board
 Pierce County Human Services
 City of Tacoma Mayor
 Tacoma City Council
 City of Tacoma Neighborhood and Community Services