

# Baltimore City Code Blue



## GOAL:

- To provide emergency health services, food and shelter to reduce death and cold weather-related injury among people experiencing homelessness on the coldest winter nights.

## THE IMPACT OF EXTREME COLD

Between 1979 and 2002, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that exposure to extreme cold caused a total of 16,555 deaths in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Risk factors for morbidity associated with extreme cold include homelessness, advanced age, substance abuse, heart failure, and diabetes.

To reduce the impact of cold exposure for vulnerable Baltimore City residents, the Baltimore City Health Department and the Baltimore City Department of Housing have established a shelter that operates only during winter months and is structured on a public health model.

## THE BALTIMORE CITY WINTER SHELTER

Each night between November 15 and March 31, the Winter Shelter offers food, access to health services, and overnight shelter to homeless Baltimore City residents. Staffing and clinic operations are overseen by the National Institute for Healthy Behaviors, and food donations are made by the Maryland Food Bank. Clients of the shelter receive a warm evening meal, a light breakfast, and access to mental health services upon request. Over the 2006-2007 winter, the Winter Shelter served an average of 229 clients each day.

## THE BALTIMORE CITY CODE BLUE PLAN

The Health Commissioner declares a "Code Blue" night on evenings when the weather forecast predicts hazardous conditions or temperatures at or below 32° F.

Once the decision has been made to declare a "Code Blue" night,

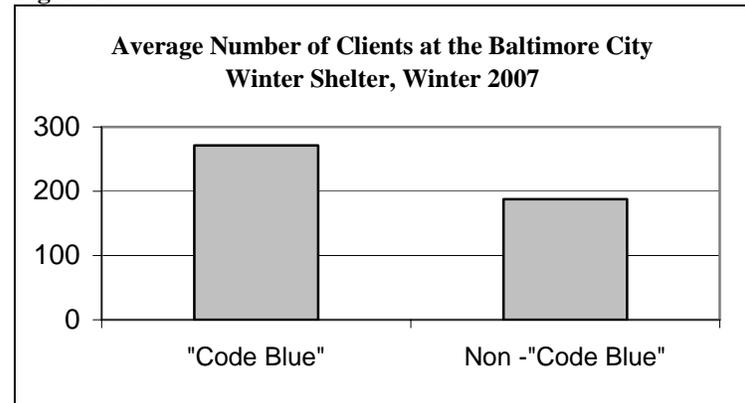
- The nonprofit organization Moveable Feast provides transportation to and from the Winter Shelter using wheelchair accessible vans. Five downtown locations are used as drop-off and pick-up points for shelter clients.

- The Health Department disseminates safety tips, locations of pick-up locations, and information on the Winter Shelter to news organizations, community partners and the City 311 call line.
- Baltimore City Homeless Services alerts homeless service providers that a "Code Blue" is in effect and facilitates distribution of outreach cards with shelter locations to inadequately housed individuals.
- Outreach teams from Baltimore Homeless Services, Johns Hopkins Outreach Services Team, People Encouraging People and the Bon Secours Mobile Assertive Team respond to calls to the City 311 call line and police dispatch regarding individuals at risk for extreme cold exposure.
- Additional services are made available at the Winter Shelter. Services include HIV and STD screening, addictions counseling, mental health case management and mental health screening and referral.

## INCREASED SERVICES ON CODE BLUE NIGHTS

Over the 2007 winter, the Winter Shelter offered services to a total of 32,213 clients. Colder temperatures and increased outreach efforts resulted in a 31% increase in the average number of shelter clients (271.3 vs. 187.7) on days when "Code Blue" went into effect (See Figure 1).

Figure 1.

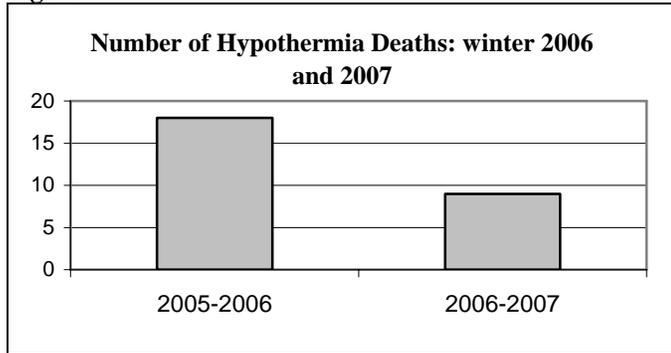


## FEWER HYPOTHERMIA DEATHS IN 2007 WINTER

The 2007 winter marked the first year during which the Winter Shelter was open daily over the winter months.

As compared to the 2006 winter, the number of days at or below 32 degrees declined by only 11% (86 vs. 77), while the number of deaths related to hypothermia decreased by 50% (18 vs. 9)<sup>2</sup> (See Figure 2).

**Figure 2.**



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following staff made substantial contributions to this report: Caroline Fichtenberg, Diane Glauber, William Glover-Bey, Jerry Huffman, Marisa North, Dourakine Rosarion, Joshua M. Sharfstein MD, Michelle Spencer.

*The Baltimore City Health Department is also grateful to the National Institute for Healthy Behaviors, the Baltimore City Police Department, the Baltimore City Department of Housing, and all city agencies and healthcare providers who contributed to the 2006-2007 Code Blue effort.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Hypothermia-Related Deaths – United States, 2003—2004. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports*. 2005 Feb;54(07): 173-175.

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, Baltimore MD. Hypothermia deaths counted as any death occurring in Baltimore City between September 1 and March 31 where exposure to cold environment was determined to be a complicating factor, excluding deaths attributed to drowning.