

# Homeless Shelter Opens for Winter with Additional Beds

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County government officials on Nov. 1 opened Arlington's emergency winter shelter, which has been expanded this year to accommodate what is expected to be a larger group in need of a place to sleep when cold weather descends on the area.

The expansion of shelter beds means 73 people can now be accommodated each night. The shelter will remain open through next March.

This year, the Arlington Street People's Assistance Network (A-SPAN) again has been tapped by the county government to run the shelter. A-SPAN's longstanding contract with the county government was terminated in early 2008, but the organization recently signed a new five-year contract to operate the facility.

"We are facing serious challenges this year with homelessness, as the number of clients we serve has jumped from 940 to over 1,300," said A-SPAN executive director Kathleen Sibert.

She said the shelter serves as "a vital part of our wraparound services," which also include daily outreach efforts, drop-in services and a bagged-meal program that serves up to 80 people every day of the year.

The shelter is located at 2049 15th Street North, just a block from the county government headquarters in the Courthouse area. Overflow emergency shelter is available at a local church, and in cases where a cold-weather emergency is declared, the county government can house additional people at a nearby facility.

Some critics have called on the county government to do more, including establishing a year-round, more updated facility for the homeless. County officials have said they want to do so as part of a broader redevelopment of the Courthouse area, but as yet no such revitalization effort has materialized.

In January 2008, an inspection by the county fire marshal's office turned up two code violations in the aging former office building that houses the facility, but they were not sufficient to require that the facility be closed.

"This shelter is not ideal," Department of Human Services director Susanne Eisner acknowledged at the time. But, she said, "it provides a safe, warm place for those in dire need to sleep, get a meal and take a shower on cold winter nights."

On Oct. 27, County Board members accepted an award of \$363,600 in federal stimulus funds designed to address homelessness, and to quickly stabilize the situations of those who find themselves without housing. The funding is on top of a previous \$728,300 grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to address the same issue.

“Homelessness is, and continues to be, a very real problem here in Arlington,” County Board Chairman Barbara Favola said.

The county government partners with organizations including A-SPAN, the Arlington-Alexandria Coalition for the Homeless, Doorways for Women and Families and Northern Virginia Family Service on matters related to homelessness in the county.