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Statewide Service Providers and Advocates for the Homeless Sound the Alarm on COVID-19
Public Health and Goals to #FlattenTheCurve At Risk if Homeless Are Not Adequately Protected

MINNESOTA (March 26, 2020) – Today, leaders from organizations across Minnesota providing emergency shelter and services to people experiencing homelessness come together with an urgent call to action for to state, local and public officials: Our ability as a state to manage community spread, #FlattenTheCurve, and reduce pressure on hospitals will not be successful if we don't ensure that funding and coordination for people experiencing homelessness are in place – if we fail in this regard, there will be significant public health implications for all of us.

“We applaud Governor Walz and his administration for the actions taken in Wednesday’s Executive Order, including requiring all Minnesotans to Stay at Home,” said Tim Marx, Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis’ President and CEO. “But every night, more than 10,000 Minnesotans don’t have a home, and our shelters are operating as field hospitals for the poor in crowded conditions with insufficient hygiene and social distancing. We need community support to fight this with all we’ve got.”

People experiencing homelessness are particularly vulnerable to infectious disease like COVID-19. They often face underlying chronic health conditions that are not properly managed, mental health issues that may affect their ability to follow medical advice and decreased access to facilities for personal hygiene and running water. On Wednesday, Wilder Research reported a 25% increase in homeless adults age 55 and older since 2015.

These challenges are exacerbated by congregate living settings. Typical best practices to protect clients, staff and volunteers from coronavirus do not apply in shelters. Shelters and emergency services for people experiencing homelessness cannot suspend services or ask front-line staff to telework. Creating social isolation in a shelter or daytime service center is a challenge, especially as more people experience joblessness and rely on critical services. It’s also common for people experiencing homelessness to travel between a number of shelters, potentially spreading the virus more quickly to more vulnerable populations.

“One of the most startling and concerning statistics in the Wilder Research report is that 57% of homeless adults have a chronic physical health condition,” said Rhonda Otteson, Executive Director of the Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless. “At a time when we are supposed to social distance to protect our neighbors so that we don’t overwhelm the health care system, we have thousands of vulnerable Minnesotans living in spaces that were not designed for social distancing.”

Together, the leaders are calling for significant action:

1. The legislature appropriated \$200 million for health care relief to fight COVID-19. Organizations that serve those experiencing homelessness are on the “front lines” of health care, providing care and support to the elderly, those with chronic conditions, cleaning up their vomit, providing basic hygiene, providing food. These organizations should be eligible for these health care funds to prevent people from entering into acute care hospitals and to prevent community spread.
2. Pass significant, additional robust COVID-19-related relief immediately and include services to people experiencing homelessness as essential services to be funded;
3. Increase resources – coordination and funding – to reflect the risk and urgency of homelessness services as the State advances a coordinated response and this requires enhanced leadership and a call to action for aggressive public /private partnerships from the Walz Administration.
4. Continued private support – Shelters are facing millions of dollars in added costs to protect the most vulnerable and broader public. Many community businesses have stepped up with innovative and meaningful ways to support these services in this time of increased need. Without continued public and private philanthropic investments, shelters will face dire choices that could impact the entire community.

Now is not the time to be tepid, timid, and tardy. We must act with speed, scale and intensity to “flatten the curve.” It will take all of us, coming together to win this fight. Minnesotans making significant sacrifices to stay home -- businesses closing their doors, people losing their jobs, Minnesotans missing birthdays and postponing weddings — may not be enough in the fight against coronavirus if we don’t support the homeless population and coordinate our response.