

# Fire codes keep churches from serving as overflow shelters

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A plan to ease wintertime shelter crowding by sending some homeless women to area churches won't work because the arrangements violated fire codes, fire officials said this week.

"It's all about safety," said Michael Fowler, a Columbus Division of Fire battalion chief. "They did inspections and decided some (churches) were unsuitable."

Smoke detectors and exits were at issue in some cases; one church planned to house the women in a basement that was accessible only by a spiral staircase, he said.

Shelter officials now hope to use space at St. Stephen's Community House in the South Linden area. Fowler said fire officials discussed that plan briefly on Thursday and expect the necessary inspections and paperwork to progress.

"We know it needs to be done, and it is a priority," he said.

Local churches had been making arrangements to take turns providing about 35 extra beds for single women. Although cold-weather expansion is typical for shelters, year-round demand and a big increase in the homeless population have complicated some of the usual plans.

The YWCA Family Center, for example, used to have enough room during the winter to accommodate the extra women. But it has been operating far beyond capacity for months, serving 80 to 120 families through a shelter designed for 50.

That's why churches were called upon, and they responded enthusiastically.

“I don’t think that it means that we cannot do that in the future,” said Michelle Heritage, executive director of the Community Shelter Board. “The faith community is just waiting to be asked for their help.”

Heritage said the YWCA will operate the shelter area at St. Stephen’s, probably by Dec. 12.

In the meantime, there are extra beds for both men and women — in separate areas — at the former Mid-Ohio Foodbank building on W. Mound Street. The YMCA of Central Ohio oversees that part of the winter overflow effort. The men’s overflow will remain there throughout the winter.

Heritage said churches can help in other ways with winter needs.

“They’re still interested in volunteering,” she said. “They could help us with staff and to feed folks.”

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