



Homeless in Harsh Weather

by Nicole Arcieri

It is no secret that people that are homeless face many challenges in their day to day lives. People that are homeless often have to worry about when they will be having their next meal, where they're going to sleep, or when their next opportunity to shower will be. What happens when increment weather conditions come into play? Last week's Nor'easter was a brutal one. Many establishments were closed on the day of the snowstorm. Even COVID-19 vaccination sites had to shut down and reschedule appointments for later in the week. Where does the homeless community go during these harsh conditions?

In New York, certain weather conditions prompt a Code Blue warning to be triggered. This alerts the Department of Homeless Services and the New York Police Department (NYPD) to contact vulnerable communities every four hours to make sure they are safe, but is this strategy truly effective? How are people that are homeless contacted? Who meets the criteria to be checked on every four hours? Is it really advantageous for the NYPD to be involved in this process? The NYPD is notorious for arresting and fining

people that are homeless. People that are homeless often get arrested for pan-handling, loitering, or evading subway fares. Furthermore, the Black community has a relationship of distrust among the police force, dating as far back as the 18th-century, when authorities would capture runaway slaves and return them to their masters. According to *HuffPost*, African-Americans are seven times more likely to be homeless than white people. Is it really in the homeless community's best interest to be in contact with the NYPD to such an extent during incremental weather conditions when they are already targeted by them in their everyday lives?

During snowstorms and other harsh weather conditions, people that are homeless have access to 24 hour drop-in centers and shelters, however, these establishments fill up very quickly. Moreover, many people in the homeless community actively avoid these facilities, as the risk of being sexually assaulted in shelters is unfortunately very high. Local organizations may organize winter clothing drives and hand out gear to keep people warm, or give out hot food and beverages, but otherwise, the homeless community is often forgotten about or poorly supported during harsh weather conditions. It is time that we offer better services and support to people that are homeless. That means decriminalizing homelessness, engaging in community outreach programs to better understand the needs of people that are homeless, and providing long-term, safe shelter options for people that are homeless, especially during winter storms and other harsh weather conditions.