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City of Northampton Announces Planned Closure of Temporary Emergency Shelter at Northampton High School

NORTHAMPTON - Today, Mayor David J. Narkewicz announced that the City of Northampton, in close collaboration with ServiceNet, will transition operations from the emergency shelter at Northampton High School (NHS) back to existing local facilities on Saturday, May 23, 2020.

The Northampton COVID-19 Emergency Operations team which includes the Health, Fire Rescue, Police, Central Services, and School departments, worked with ServiceNet to rapidly open the shelter at NHS at a time when proper social distancing in existing facilities wasn't possible and an outbreak could quickly overwhelm our healthcare system.

The city and its partners have a deliberate and careful plan to transition shelter locations, which includes working closely with ServiceNet to survey shelter residents about their ongoing service needs, outgoing and ongoing COVID-19 testing for at-risk individuals, continued food distribution, transportation assistance, installation of handwashing stations and portable toilets downtown while public and private resources remain closed, among others.

"Each year, when our winter shelter closes, our staff speaks with every individual to discuss their next steps. For some it may be subsidized housing, using rapid re-housing funds for initial rental costs or staying with friends or a family member. We do our best to assist in finding shelter for all the individuals. This is an ongoing issue we work on all year in efforts to keep people from the street." said Sue Stubbs, Executive Director of ServiceNet, "We are working closely with the city to plan a safe transition as we close the shelter at NHS."

At this time, our healthcare system is better prepared to handle COVID-19 cases. With warmer weather ahead, a congregate shelter where residents come and go poses a potential health risk for residents, workers, and volunteers and could contribute to an outbreak of the disease in the very population the shelter was designed to protect. Last week, the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) closed its Northampton-based regional Isolation and Recovery Shelter for COVID-19 positive vulnerable residents.

“I am very proud of the team of individuals who helped make this critical effort possible, and I am eternally grateful to community partners like ServiceNet, Smith College, the Hampshire County House of Corrections and everyone who donated time, materials and support to make the shelter possible during the worst part of this emergency,” said Mayor Narkewicz, “We have learned a lot and will be ready to move quickly should the need arise to reopen a shelter.”

In addition, the city, with input from a broad swath of stakeholders, is in its early stages of exploring the possible creation of a permanent Resiliency Hub that is designed to serve the dual purpose of providing shelter during emergencies for city residents, and through a social services partner, provide daily services to those that need them the rest of the time. This effort grew from a greater understanding of the needs presented by the pandemic, as well as needs identified in previously initiated studies around at-risk populations, housing access, and panhandling.

For more information, contact the Mayor’s office at 413-587-1249 or mayor@northamptonma.gov