



March 2, 2021

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Council Member Linda Finger, [lfinger@cityofporterdale.com](mailto:lfinger@cityofporterdale.com)  
Council Member Mike Harper, [mharper@cityofporterdale.com](mailto:mharper@cityofporterdale.com)  
Council Member Lowell Chambers, [lchambers@cityofporterdale.com](mailto:lchambers@cityofporterdale.com)

Via email

Dear Mayor Chapman and Council Members,

I write on behalf of the National Homelessness Law Center (“Law Center”) to express concern regarding Porterdale’s recent vote to order Rainbow Covenant Ministries to stop operating its temporary warming center serving the area’s homeless without providing individual housing.

To aid communities like Porterdale in transitioning people experiencing homelessness to individual housing units, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has recently approved waivers of both its 30 day renewal and 25% match requirements, offering *100% reimbursement* for non-congregate shelter (i.e. hotel or motel rooms) *for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic*. See <https://nlihc.org/resource/fema-changes-policy-approve-non-congregate-shelter-reimbursement-duration-emergency>, <https://nlihc.org/resource/new-executive-order-addresses-urgent-health-and-housing-needs-people-experiencing>. **This means Porterdale has no fiscal constraint to stop it from offering hotel rooms to people experiencing homelessness for the duration of the crisis.** Thus we urge the city to focus its efforts on getting its unsheltered population into individual hotel rooms, at no local cost, for the duration of the pandemic.

The Law Center is the only national legal advocacy organization dedicated solely to ending and preventing homelessness. We have published numerous reports, including *Tent City, USA: The Growth of America’s Homeless Encampments*, and *How Communities are Responding* collecting best practices, model policies, and case studies from across the country on how to constructively address homeless encampments. See [https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Tent\\_City\\_USA\\_2017.pdf](https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Tent_City_USA_2017.pdf).

According to the CDC, COVID-19 primarily spreads from person-to-person, between people within six feet of each other, and from droplets that are expelled when a person infected with COVID-19 coughs or sneezes. Recent reports project that homeless individuals infected by COVID-19 would be twice as likely to be hospitalized, two to four times as likely to require critical care, and two to three times as likely to die of COVID-19 than the general population. See [https://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID-paper\\_clean-636pm.pdf](https://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID-paper_clean-636pm.pdf). To prevent contracting and transmitting COVID-19, people are encouraged to wash their hands properly and frequently, avoid close contact with others, and to stay home if they are feeling sick.

For people experiencing homelessness, options for following CDC personal health recommendations are extremely limited since there are too few private housing and shelter options available, even as the pandemic persist. Congregate shelters are not necessarily equipped to truly safeguard against the spread of the virus. This is because congregate shelter settings do not allow for the recommended social distancing, air circulation, and sanitation necessary to stem the spread of the virus. In San Francisco, 144 residents in a single shelter were

tested and five were found positive for COVID-19. Less than one week later, 92 of those residents tested positive for COVID-19, along with 10 shelter staff workers. *See* Colette Auerswald et al., *For the Good of Us All: Addressing the Needs of Our Unhoused Neighbors During the COVID-19 Pandemic* (2020), <https://publichealth.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/For-the-Good-of-Us-All-Report.pdf>.

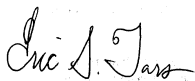
However, transitioning people into individual housing units, such as the many vacant hotel rooms now available, is the best practice and would ensure they would be able to effectively socially distance themselves and have access to adequate sanitation, as well as be easily accessible to health care and other service providers. As noted above, FEMA is now providing 100% reimbursement for communities providing non-congregate shelter. Porterdale can look to California and other communities which are procuring hotel and motel rooms to safely isolate people experiencing homelessness and reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread. *See* <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2020/04/03/at-newly-converted-motel-governor-newsom-launches-project-roomkey-a-first-in-the-nation-initiative-to-secure-hotel-motel-rooms-to-protect-homeless-individuals-from-covid-19/>. This presents an opportunity not only to ensure the health and safety of Porterdale's most vulnerable residents, but also give an infusion of federal dollars to its ailing hospitality industry.

We all share the goal of not having homeless persons relying on facilities like temporary warming centers—but the best, most cost-effective, and permanent way to achieve that is to ensure that all who are unsheltered are able to access adequate, alternative housing. These approaches are necessary for the current crisis, but they are also best practice for the long term, from both a public health and fiscal policy perspective. We urge you to follow the CDC recommendations as well as the Law Center's Encampment Best Practices and Procedures found in the Tent City Report, and take advantage of FEMA's offer to **get your entire homeless population into safe housing with no local costs**.

This is not a matter of charity, but of public health that will not only benefit people experiencing homelessness, but the housed members of your community who will have hospital beds available to them when they need them, instead of having those beds unnecessarily occupied by people who were unable to shelter and subjected to increased risk of infection.

If Porterdale would like, we would be happy to work with you to develop and implement solutions that work for everyone. Please feel free to contact us at [etars@nlchp.org](mailto:etars@nlchp.org) or 202-638-2535 x. 120 with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,



Eric S. Tars  
Legal Director