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First Baptist Church will serve as white flag shelter location

First Baptist Church in Wilson will serve as the white flag shelter location this winter, offering overnight refuge when temperatures drop to 35 degrees or below. The United Way of Wilson County is leading the effort along with various community partners.

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First Baptist Church's fellowship hall will serve as the primary location for Wilson's white flag cold weather emergency shelter. The temporary shelter will open when temperatures, including wind chill, fall to 35 degrees or lower. Olivia Neeley | Times

When freezing cold temperatures hit Wilson this winter, those without shelter will have a safe, warm and temporary place to go. First Baptist Church on Nash Street will serve as the primary site for the new white flag

shelter. White flag shelters are temporary emergency overnight shelters that open when dangerously cold weather hits.

First Baptist Church's fellowship hall will be designated as the shelter area, while St. John A.M.E. Zion Church on Pender Street will be the backup site. The white flag shelter will open when temperatures or the wind chill drops to 35 degrees or below and will operate from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. The shelter would be activated as needed from December through March.

For nearly a year, about 45 community partners have worked together to make the white flag shelter a reality. Those partnerships include the United Way of Wilson County, churches, private residents, the Wesley Shelter, Hope Station, Wilson County Department of Social Services and city and county government, officials said.

"It's a community effort," said Judi Thurston, United Way of Wilson County's executive director.

COMMON PURPOSE

The United Way of Wilson County has taken the lead in organizing and financing the project. The agency has provided \$5,000 in seed funding and will continue to support the white flag shelter's operations along with community donations, Thurston said.

The Rev. Chris Thomas of First Baptist Church said the church's location and available space made it the right fit.

"We have an overabundance of space, and it's being underutilized,"

Thomas said. "This is for the folks who not have a safe and warm place to sleep when it's freezing outside."

Thomas said it did not matter how many people utilize the white flag shelter space, if the community is able to keep one person from freezing to death, it's worth it.

The Rev. Edwin Ferguson of St. John A.M.E. Zion said their church is honored and grateful to serve as the backup location for the community.

"Together, we share a common purpose: to build a stronger, more connected community," he said.

Hard work has been happening behind the scenes for several months, too. Both churches have been inspected by the city for safety and code requirements to be designated as temporary emergency shelters, which means it's limited to housing up to 20 people per night when the white flag shelter status is activated.

35-DEGREE TRIGGER

Lori Walston, Wilson County DSS' communications manager and committee member, said the idea of establishing a white flag shelter grew out of the Wilson/Greene Housing Committee several years ago and residents asking city and county leaders about having a designated location.

The United Way of Wilson County has set up a fund to help support the White Flag Cold Weather Emergency Shelter and created a line item in its budget to accept community donations. Officials said law enforcement, fire departments and 911 communications are on board as well.

Walston said Wilson County Emergency Management will monitor weather conditions and alert organizers when the 35-degree trigger is met.

"As the weather reports come out and we see that we're going to start potentially having nights that we're going to go down to those temperatures, that triggers the communication rolling," Walston said.

"People will be ready to deploy," Thurston added.

VOLUNTEER TRAINING

Volunteer training began Wednesday, with another training session planned for Saturday. Officials say they are training committee members first and will open the next round of training to the public in mid-November. Volunteers must be at least 21 years old and pass a background check.

The American Red Cross is providing training for shelter operations.

"It's the same training they would use for any Red Cross volunteer who's going to be in a shelter dynamic," Walston said. "It's the best training we knew existed to get people prepared."

Community leaders hope churches, individuals and others will step up and support the effort. Volunteers can help in several ways, including working shifts, setting up, preparing meals and supporting guests. Others can donate funds or items such as meals, cots, blankets and supplies. There's also a way to support spiritually by praying for shelter guests and volunteers and sharing information with local congregations.

Thurston said additional training through Trillium Health Resources will include including mental health first aid and de-escalation. Hands-only CPR and naloxone training will also be part of the volunteer training program.

"The population that we're serving is a population that most citizens have not had a connection with," Thurston said. "We want to make sure they're properly trained on how to best serve somebody who is homeless."

Thurston said United Way of Wilson County also has plans to provide help for shelter guests who want it.

“It’s not just opening the door and being kind and letting somebody in,” she said. “It is working with a population that we want to lift up and be successful, not somebody we’re going to turn back out with no resources. This is very important work that we’re doing. We want to make sure that the people that we’re serving have the best chance to be successful. That’s why training is so important in this.”

COMMUNITY AWARENESS

Thurston said next steps include recruiting volunteers, completing training and spreading awareness in both the city and county about the white flag shelter. Organizers also plan to distribute posters and postcards downtown and across the county to inform the community. Business owners, churches and local agencies are being asked to help spread the word. Those interested in becoming a volunteer can visit this shortened link at <https://tinyurl.com/bddwt2cs> to sign up. To make a financial donation visit <https://unitedwayofwilson.org/give>. For more ways to get involved in the effort contact Judi Thurston at director@unitedwayofwilson.org.