

HOMELESS FAQs

If you are in need of Homeless Services, please call 211 or visit:
<https://tn211.myresourcedirectory.com> and <https://knoxhousinghelp.com>

What is the City’s policy on “tent camps”?

Living in a tent is prohibited in the City of Knoxville. Tents and other makeshift structures can’t provide the basic levels of health, safety and sanitation required for long-term human habitation. These challenges are compounded as the number of occupants in a tent encampment increases, resulting in unhealthy and unsafe conditions for inhabitants, as well as (often) an increase in criminal activity that affects both people living in encampments and nearby residents and businesses.

Does the City of Knoxville condone or engage in raids on homeless encampments?

No. The collaborative aim of the City and our community of service providers is to help unhoused neighbors access social services, shelter and permanent housing, in order to live with dignity in a safe, healthy environment. The City’s standard policy is to provide at least 72 hours’ notice when a camp must be cleaned out.

How much notice do people living in camps get when they’re told to move?

Typically 72 hours in advance, the City and service partners provide notice to occupants of the affected areas that a cleanup has been scheduled and that they need to secure their belongings and move to shelter that is more appropriate.

What happens during the cleanup of a homeless camp?

Following official notice to occupants (usually at least 72 hours in advance), Public Service crews arrive to remove any items and waste remaining in the area. Outreach workers are usually onsite during a cleanup to continue to assist camp inhabitants in finding shelter and accessing services that can lead them to permanent housing.

How does the City decide when to conduct a cleanup?

Illegal activity, health concerns, declining environmental conditions and complaints drive the decision to conduct a cleanup in order to address hazards facing those living in a homeless camp as well as surrounding neighbors and businesses.

Are beds available in Knoxville for people who want to sleep indoors at night?

Yes. Knox Area Rescue Ministries, Volunteer Ministries Center, and The Salvation Army operate shelters. These providers have worked with the Knox County Health Department to make their facilities as safe as possible for guests and staff during COVID. For a full list of shelters and transitional housing options in Knoxville, call 2-1-1 or visit <https://knoxhousinghelp.com>.

Are the shelters full?

No. Approximately 40 percent of providers’ 365 emergency shelter beds are usually available. Even through the pandemic and colder weather, shelters have regularly had additional, vacant beds available to serve unsheltered people. (via [Knox HMIS](#)).

Does the City own or operate homeless shelters?

No. Social service providers offer several shelter and housing options within the City. View a list of providers and their contact information [here](#).

HOMELESS FAQs

Isn't it more humane to let camps stay intact during cold weather?

No. In fact during cold temperatures it is more essential for unhoused people to find indoor shelter in a place that protects them from the elements. There are available beds at our shelters, including a low-barrier shelter.

What is the "White Flag" policy?

When temperatures hit the extremes (below 32° in winter and above 90° in summer) Knox Area Rescue Ministries, Salvation Army, and Volunteer Ministry Center participate in White Flag. During White Flag conditions, these providers encourage all people experiencing homelessness to seek shelter indoors. Programs relax rules to allow individuals to come inside for the day or night, even if these individuals might not be allowed in the program under other conditions. In addition, providers create overflow space to ensure that anyone who wants to come indoors can. (per [Knoxville Knox County Homeless Coalition](#))

What about camps on private property?

Camping without permission on private property is trespassing. Campers on private property are asked to relocate within a timeframe determined by the landowner. They are also offered assistance and services.

What is the current COVID-19 policy regarding homelessness?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, shelters have worked with the Knox County Health Department to make their facilities safe for staff and guests. Even with increased spacing between beds and other COVID prevention protocols in place, shelters have consistently had additional unused capacity throughout the pandemic (since March 2020). View quarterly updates on the [KnoxHMIS dashboard](#).

Is shelter available for homeless people who have COVID-19?

Yes. Volunteer Ministry Center, in cooperation with KCHD, has opened and operated The Guest House, a separate, non-congregate shelter that provides quarantine units for people who are either waiting for COVID-19 test results or who are COVID-positive and recuperating.

Is the City following CDC guidance regarding homeless camps?

Yes. When the City has cleaned up encampments during the pandemic, the threats to the health and safety of camp inhabitants and the surrounding community outweighed the risks of individuals sleeping in our local emergency shelters, **which do have beds available** and they have adapted their facilities to reduce the risks of spreading COVID-19 among guests.

What guidance does the CDC give to communities regarding encampments?

According to the CDC: "Lack of housing contributes to poor physical and mental health outcomes, and linkages to permanent housing for people experiencing homelessness should continue to be a priority. In the context of COVID-19 spread and transmission, the risks associated with sleeping outdoors or in an encampment setting are different from staying indoors in a congregate setting such as an emergency shelter or other congregate living facility. Outdoor settings may allow people to increase physical distance between themselves and others. However, sleeping outdoors often does not provide protection from the environment, adequate access to hygiene and sanitation facilities, or connection to services and healthcare. The **balance of risks** should be considered for each individual experiencing unsheltered homelessness." ([more info on CDC](#))

HOMELESS FAQs

How can people living in encampments get help?

Approximately 10 outreach workers make regular contact with people living in encampments throughout the city. They offer connections to shelter and housing and services like drug treatment programs, health care, job skills training and more. Individuals experiencing homelessness can also call 211 to receive a direct referral to agencies that provide needed services.

What happens when people accept help from outreach workers?

Individuals who seek assistance with housing or other services are added to our local Coordinated Entry System called [CHAMP](#) (Coordinated Housing Assessment and Match Plan). This system allows providers to prioritize individuals seeking assistance based on vulnerability and direct them to an appropriate housing option.

What if someone refuses the options presented to them?

The City and our partners can't force people to go into a shelter or accept assistance. It is within the rights of a person living unsheltered to refuse the shelter and service options offered to them. However, once a person is given notice and asked to leave a particular location, they cannot continue to camp on public or private property.

What percentage of Knoxville people experiencing homelessness are "street" homeless?

Although the number fluctuates, at any given time there are roughly 800 people in Knoxville experiencing homelessness, with 75.6% considered sheltered and 24.4% unsheltered. Of those, about 22% are chronically homeless.

What's the difference between chronically homeless and street homeless?

An individual can be chronically homeless while staying at an emergency shelter (sheltered) or on the street (unsheltered). Unsheltered specifically refers to those who were sleeping in what HUD defines as "places not meant for habitation" on the night they were contacted by outreach workers or logged into the CHAMP system. Most people find temporary housing with friends, family members, or via the many organizations that work on rapid re-housing. The City of Knoxville's goal is to help people find permanent housing in as short a time as possible.

How much does the City of Knoxville spend to address homelessness?

In the last 12 months, the City has committed over \$6,800,000 to address homelessness. Resources include nearly \$1,000,000 in local funding, as well as over \$5,800,000 in federal funding, including COVID-related funding for homelessness and homelessness prevention.

In addition, the City also applies for approximately \$1.3 million in federal "Continuum of Care" grant funds that go directly from HUD to area partner agencies.

What does the City's Office on Homelessness do?

The City's [Office on Homelessness](#) helps convene and coordinate community service providers around shared goals and strategies to address homelessness. The Mayor hosts a quarterly Roundtable on Homelessness at which agencies can regularly share information with other groups working on issues of homelessness.

What challenges do service providers face in their efforts to help people experiencing homelessness?

Every person experiencing homelessness is different. Individuals have different needs, desires, life histories and personal challenges. There is not one solution to homelessness. Successful approaches include mental health services, drug treatment, temporary shelter, more affordable housing and more permanent supportive housing.

HOMELESS FAQs

Does the City of Knoxville criminalize homelessness?

KPD does not arrest people for being unhoused. We believe that homelessness is not an acceptable circumstance for anyone in our community. We work with partner agencies and social service providers to help individuals and families experiencing homelessness to gain access to services, shelter, and permanent housing to help prevent and end homelessness.

What options are available for people who say they're banned from a shelter?

Volunteer Ministry Center operates a "low barrier" shelter called The Foyer, which is smaller than other shelters and has greater flexibility with the rules (particularly regarding sobriety and pets). Guests are referred to the Foyer by street outreach workers, who are able to determine that a given individual is unsheltered because they are unwilling or unable to access other shelter options.

How can I help?

All of our partners welcome volunteers and donations. [Please contact one of the service providers](#) to find out what kind of donations best help our unhoused neighbors and how you can ultimately help them get the housing they need.