



Photo by Shelley Hanson  
Street Moms volunteer Lynn Kettler on Friday holds one of the notices posted by the city of Wheeling that states people living at an encampment under a highway overpass must vacate by 1 p.m. Dec. 15.

## Homeless Camp Is Set For Removal WVDOH Wants All Out By December 15

By SHELLEY HANSON  
Staff Writer

WHEELING — A homeless encampment underneath a state highway in Wheeling will be disbanded soon.

A notice posted by the city of Wheeling at the encampment, located across from Catholic Charities 18th Street Center, states people living there must vacate the property by 1 p.m. Dec. 15.

The property belongs to the West Virginia Division of Highways. Street Moms volunteer Lynn Kettler said she learned the DOH received a complaint from a neighbor about the camp, which led to the city posting the notice.

A DOH District 6 official could not be reached Friday for comment. City of Wheeling Homeless Liaison Melissa Adams said Friday the Wheeling Police Department was contacted by the WVDOH on Nov. 4 and asked that the state's "no trespassing" sign be enforced. The DOH originally wanted the encampment removed by Thanksgiving, but after talking with agencies who help the homeless, Adams said she was able to get the DOH to agree to extending the deadline.

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## CAMP

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"I scheduled a meeting that was held at the City-County Building where many of the local nonprofits came together to discuss arrangements that would please the WVDOH and cause the least amount of disturbance to our homeless population while keeping them safe," Adams said. "I am aware this is an impossible feat, given the circumstances, but my intentions are to try to make it the best outcome possible."

Adams said it was decided to align the closing of the camp with the opening of the Winter Freeze Shelter on Monday instead of Dec. 15, which was its original opening date for the season.

"This space is donated to YSS by the city to host the shelter for the winter months," Adams said. "We also offered the first floor of the former Northwood Building to Catholic Charities to host a day shelter. This provides shelter for the homeless for both day and night."

"We understand that these are not permanent solutions, however, they solve the immediate issue, while we continue to work together to find a more permanent space," Adams continued, adding Catholic Charities decided to operate the warming center in a church across from the camp instead.

Kettler said she and her fellow Street Moms have already helped relocate two of the homeless who had been living at the site to other smaller encampments and a couple people into actual housing.

However, this particular encampment includes several people with mental and

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— Street Moms volunteer Lynn Kettler

physical challenges, she noted. One woman, she said, has mental challenges and will not understand why she must leave the property.

Many people have lived there during the COVID-19 pandemic or for about two years. Others have come and gone. Typically between 20 and 30 people are living there at one time, Kettler said. The site is ideal as it is located just across the street from Catholic Charities 18th Street Center where people can receive hot meals to-go. Catholic Charities also is operating the warming center.

Overnight accommodations at the Winter Freeze Shelter are located at the former Hillcrest center at the old Ohio Valley Medical Center, 2000 Eoff St., Center Wheeling.

Kettler said for the homeless who live in this encampment and other camps, most do not like to leave their camp for fear of their belongings being stolen

while they are gone. Many people carry belongings in bags and backpacks, but not everything fits.

"They're taking away their home right before Christmas," Kettler said. "They're asking where they can go, but there are no answers."

Kettler said the public has helped the Street Moms take care of the people and the camp by donating food, water and clothing. One man recently dropped off two trays of hot pizza — a real treat for the people living there, she noted. There are portable bathrooms at the site, but they have not been emptied for a while and are full, she said. Dumpsters at the site also need to be emptied. There once was an outdoor shower facility, but it is gone, which means there is no running water for people to drink.

Kettler said people who would like to donate bottled water can do so by dropping it off at the site. To help people move, she said totes and bags are needed. Gloves of any kind are in short supply.

"We're trying to keep people alive," Kettler said, noting seven people have died in the past six months. "They are my friends. I love them. I spend more time with these guys than I do with my own family."

On Friday, after learning of the camp's pending closure, employees at Helping Heroes visited the camp to tell those living there that, if they are veterans, the organization has an emergency shelter that operates 8 p.m. to 8 a.m.

daily, at the former Hillcrest site and to use the entrance with the black awning. They also handed out some heavy-duty flannel jackets to anyone who wanted one.

R.J. Konkoleski, executive director of Helping Heroes, said the organization received VA funding and so it can only provide emergency housing to veterans. They also provide help to veterans who need guidance in applying for VA benefits. They also assist in finding jobs and permanent housing.

He said since March their shelter has housed a total of 16 individuals. It is able to house a total of eight at one time, though it has never done so, to date. Each room has its own bathroom with a shower.

YSS Communications Director Betsy Bethel-McFarland said the Winter Freeze Shelter is opening nine days early, on Monday, in preparation for people having to leave the encampment.

"We are grateful to the city of Wheeling for partnering with us again to hold the Winter Freeze Shelter in this ideal location and for allowing us to open nine days early to accommodate the people who will be displaced by the encampment removal on 18th Street," Bethel-McFarland said. "At the former Hillcrest location, our shelter guests are able to sleep comfortably two to a room, take showers each day and gather together in a large enough space to maintain social distance as we continue with our pandemic safety protocols."