

A man died on the steps of my church Sunday night

By [Jonathan Grieser](#)

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Sunday night, a homeless man died on the steps just outside the entrance to the men's drop-in shelter at Grace Episcopal Church in Madison, Wisconsin, the church I serve. I don't know much more than that. Apparently he had left Grace to go to one of the overflow shelters to spend the night. I don't know what the cause of death was. I don't know if his death was at all related to the brutally cold weather.

I blogged [last week](#) about last-minute scrambling to make sure there were facilities open during the day on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. On Sunday, local anti-homelessness organization [Porchlight](#) adjusted its hours so that men could stay indoors until the Central Library opened at 1 p.m. And yesterday, provisions were made by the County and by Porchlight to provide transportation between the shelter at Grace (where intake occurs, meals are provided, and there are shower and laundry facilities) and the two overflow shelters at St. John's Lutheran and First United Methodist Church.

Yesterday was the first Monday of the month, Grace's night to provide the meal for shelter guests and other community people. Because of the cold and worries about transportation for our volunteers, we made alternative arrangements to serve the meal down in the shelter. The menu was already less elaborate than we usually like to provide. The guys had pulled pork sandwiches with cole slaw and chips. Our sexton Russ was the chef.

Volunteers and advocates had spent a couple of days visiting remote campsites to urge people to seek shelter, and providing additional supplies for those who declined to move. Most of us worry that people will die either at campsites like that or in the cars where some live. We assume that if they come to the shelters, they will survive the cold weather. But Sunday, someone who came to the drop-in shelter died on the doorstep outside.

Our immediate tendency is to want to place blame when deaths like this occur. Why does Porchlight operate its shelters in this way? Why didn't the City or County

prepare better for the cold weather that had been predicted for a week? If transportation had been provided, would this man have survived?

These are hard questions and need to be asked. But there's an even more uncomfortable question that needs to be asked, not of social service agencies or city and county government. It's the question we need to ask ourselves as a community. Why do we lack adequate facilities for the neediest people among us? Why do we lack a men's shelter that provides adequate space for all who need it? Why do we lack a permanent day center that offers the full array of services needed by homeless people?

And there's a question I need to ask myself. I received an e-mail from a homeless advocate Sunday afternoon asking if I knew of special provisions for transportation between Grace and the overflow shelters. My response was simply, "I'm not in the loop on this." If I had pursued it—if I had contacted Porchlight staff, government officials, other advocates—could I have helped prevent that death? Even if the death was completely unrelated to the cold weather, someone died at Grace—alone, uncomforted, on a cold night. That should never happen.

In addition, [Brenda Konkel](#) drew my attention to [this report](#) from the National Coalition for the Homeless, which surveys what communities do in the winter and offers recommendations for best practices. There's a lot in the document we can learn from, especially the recommendation to have a plan in place well before the onset of winter.

On December 30, many of us received a request from the County asking whether we might be able to open our churches because of the lack of facilities open on New Year's Eve and Day. On Sunday afternoon, advocates scrambled to provide for transportation between the shelters and Monday afternoon; the County finally made that happen for Monday night and Tuesday. New Year's comes every year, and every winter sees severe weather. How hard would it be to prepare a severe weather plan in advance and publicize it widely so people know what will happen?

*Originally posted at [Grieser's blog](#)*