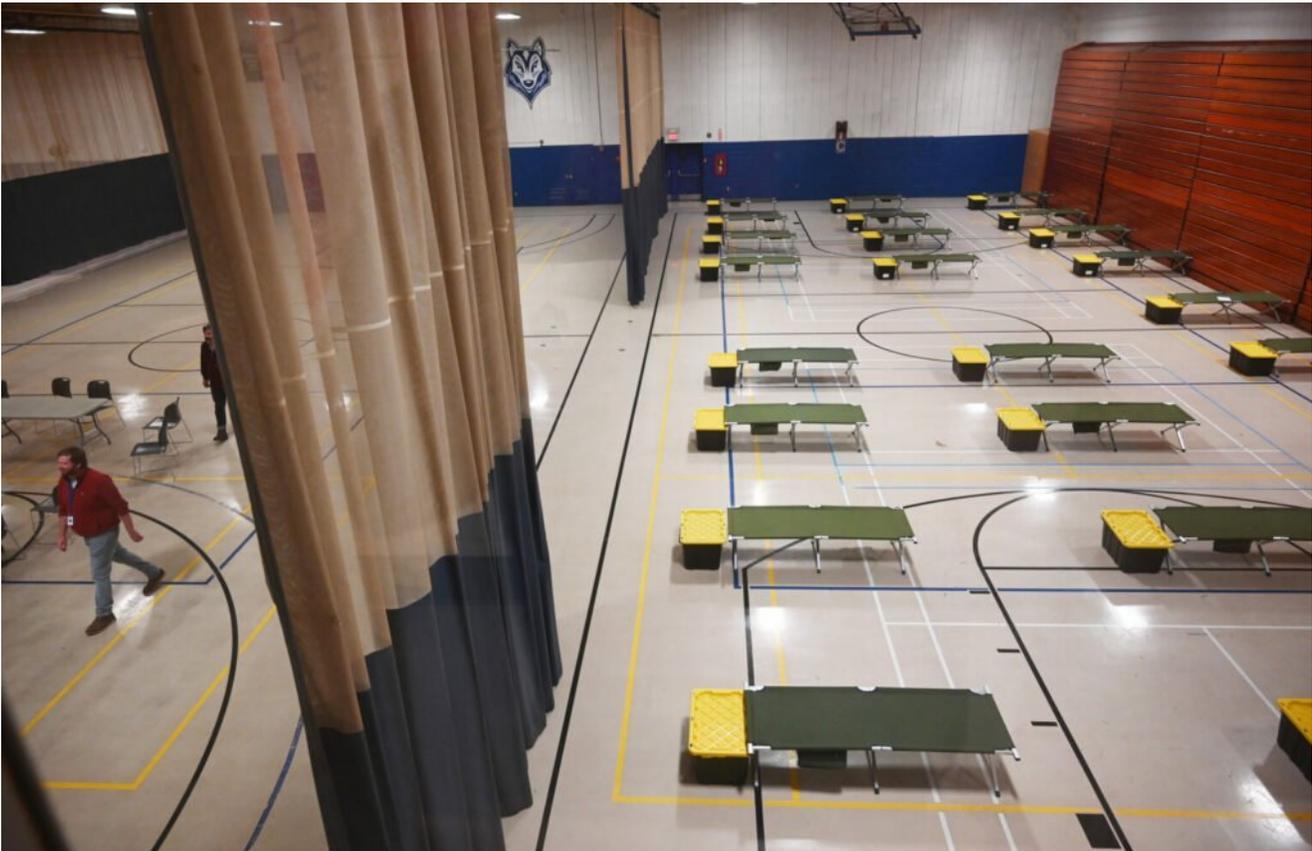


Pandemic drives planning to revamp shelter system for Maine's homeless

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By Randy BillingsStaff Writer

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USM's Sullivan Gym was converted to a shelter for homeless men and women who were not showing signs of COVID-19, but the university system now says it needs to reclaim its gyms as the return of students approaches. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

The state is working with homeless advocates on a plan to restructure the state's network of homeless shelters and emergency housing programs, said MaineHousing Director Dan Brennan.

Brennan told lawmakers during a virtual hearing Thursday that the pandemic has shown that Maine's shelter system is inadequate. He said that the state is working with advocates on a new statewide shelter organization, and that this is a "generational opportunity to make significant change."

"We simply can't go back to the way things were," Brennan said. "We need a new shelter system. We need a new approach."

Brennan said he was not ready to announce specific plans. But the plan would likely call for “significant investments” in new buildings, he said. Funding could come from the federal CARES Act, which was passed to help communities respond to the pandemic, and possibly from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, he said.

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“At this point we’re in the visioning stage,” Brennan said. “There are natural collaborations that can be achieved within a particular community or within a particular geographic region.”

A spokesperson for MaineHousing said no additional information was available because the planning is in its early stages, and there is no timeline for releasing a plan.

Also Thursday, a representative of the University of Maine System told the Legislature’s Labor and Housing Committee that it plans to reclaim gyms being used as temporary shelters for homeless people who don’t have COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.

Samantha Warren, UMaine’s director of government and community relations, said the university is preparing for the return of staff, faculty and students to campus, possibly as soon as July, so the temporary wellness centers in Portland and Presque Isle need to be returned to university use.

Warren said the eight people staying at the Presque Isle center will likely be housed by July and an “exhaustive effort” is underway in Portland to find a new location for a wellness center. She said the university hopes to reclaim the Portland gym by mid-July.

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Warren said the Sullivan Gym at the University of Southern Maine in Portland has provided emergency shelter to 81 people since opening on April 3.

“It is proving very challenging to find a space that can accommodate this number of people in a configuration that (we) need to be in,” Warren said, noting the need to keep at least 6 feet of space between cots and other physical distancing requirements.

In addition to five wellness shelters in Maine, the state has been renting hotel rooms for people who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 so they can safely isolate. And the city of Portland has been using a portion of its family shelter to isolate infected clients and using the Portland Expo to quarantine people who've had close contact with someone who has COVID-19.

Last year, the Portland City Council concluded a challenging citywide search for a new shelter location. It selected a site on Riverside Street to build a new shelter that would serve an average of 200 people a night. The USM gym serves considerably fewer people, with a maximum capacity of 50 at a time.

A spokeswoman for Preble Street, the nonprofit social services agency running the USM shelter, said Executive Director Mark Swann was not available to discuss the search for a new location for its wellness center, or statewide planning efforts.

Preble Street previously offered to use a building it bought at 55 Portland St. for shelter space. Spokeswoman Jennifer Tibbals did not respond to a question about whether that facility could still be used.

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"We are aware of USM's deadline and are part of the conversation," City Hall Communications Director Jessica Grondin said. "No final plans have been made yet."

The city of Portland has long borne much of the responsibility for providing emergency shelter and other services to people in Maine. It's the state's only municipality that runs a low-barrier shelter that will accept people who are actively using drugs and alcohol. That shelter regularly exceeds its 154-person capacity, so additional overflow space is needed.

Historically, about a third of the people in Portland's shelters previously lived in the city, another third have been from elsewhere in Maine and the rest are from out-of-state.

Most shelters in Maine are operated by nonprofits and are tailored to a specific clientele, such as families or domestic violence victims. Or they have strict requirements that make it difficult for people actively using drugs or alcohol, or in a mental health crisis, to stay there.

Grondin deferred questions about statewide shelter planning to City Councilor Belinda Ray, who could not be reached Thursday afternoon.

The statewide shelter planning is being undertaken by Statewide Homeless Council, the Maine Continuum of Care and the Maine Shelter Network, according to Cullen Ryan,

executive director of Community Housing of Maine, a nonprofit affordable housing group. The group has asked the governor for funding through the CARES Act.

"I am hopeful this will lead to long-lasting systemic change, but that will be decided by which resources are put into this effort," Ryan said.

Spokespeople for Gov. Mills did not respond to questions about the proposal.

Ryan, who serves in all three groups, said they have developed four areas that need to be addressed: an emergency shelter system with the capacity to respond to significant public health emergencies; resources to find permanent housing quickly so people don't need to stay in a homeless shelter; supportive housing for the most vulnerable populations; and increasing affordable housing stock.

"This four-pronged approach provides a blueprint for how to invest in needed infrastructure and services to protect the health and safety of people experiencing homelessness," Ryan said in an email. "This is a comprehensive approach, from safe and dignified shelter to supporting individuals and families to quickly move into permanent, stable housing."

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