

Sounds From the Street: Advocate Kate Coventry on the D.C. Winter Plan

Transcribed by: Joseph Doyle

Kate Coventry (Guest): In the District of Columbia, the law requires that people be offered shelter when the weather falls below thirty-degrees or it's forecasted to fall below thirty-two degrees.

[Music]

KC: A winter plan lays out how we're going to fulfill this law. How we are going to keep people who are unhoused safe during winter weather.

Adam Kampe (Host): That's advocate Kate Coventry. This is *Sounds From the Street*. A podcast about homelessness and life on the margins. I'm your host, Adam Kampe.

Kate Coventry is an analyst at the D.C Fiscal Policy Institute, or DCFPI. One critical part of her job is help shape the winter plan. A multi-faceted effort to serve and protect the homeless when the weather threatens to, or does dip below freezing. This strategic plan is the handiwork of many people, including citizens who are or have been homeless. On that note, we'll also hear from Reggie Black who has first hand experience from both sides of the winter plan. Outside, when he was homeless, and inside, as part of the organization who drafts the plan. Thought it's not perfect, the plan is a remarkable example of community and partnership in action. Before we dive into the 2015-2016 winter plan, which runs from November 1st to the end of this month, March 31st. Kate is going to kick things off with some background of her work.

KC: We are part of the Center, Budget, and Policy parties which is a national policy research organization. There are groups like us across the states that are independent from the center but receive technical assistance and other kinds of help from the center. There are groups like us all over the place but we are part of the center.

AK: As an agency that is rooted and bolstering the voice of marginalized or low income folks, what do you do in terms of homelessness.

KC: Sure. I'm a voting member of the Inter Agency Council and Homelessness. That's a group of government officials advocates, like me. Folks who have experienced homelessness and providers of services come together to make homeless policies for the District of Columbia. As part of that body I got to a lot of meetings where we review protocol and get feedback from clients about different issues that are happening and try to look ahead to try to predict how many housing slots and how many shelter slots we're going to need. Importantly we work on the winter plan every year, the plan to protect people from hypothermic injury during the winter. We write blogs, we testimony, talk to policy workers about what research says about homelessness,

AK: You've been in this universe, this arena of advocacy for quite some time. What initially drew you to this line of work?

KC: When I first moved to D.C. I worked for a lot of small local groups and I saw how policy was working against what these groups were trying to do. For instance how our temporary assistance for needy families program was actually counterproductive to what organizations though would help people get to work. That is the overall goal of the plan. I was very interested in policy. I went to policy school then I came here to the D.C, Fiscal Policy Institute.

AK: You talked a little about the budget involved and how it comes to pass.

KC: Here at DCFPI we believe that our budget is are statement of our priorities as a city. D.C. in the last year, the current fiscal year we made the most investments in housing and homelessness than we have ever made as a city. We put a considerable amount of local money into it. We also get a good amount of federal money. A lot of that flows through our fiscal agent community partnership for the prevention of homelessness. That's given out in grants for various programs for various families and individuals and for youth. We spend a good amount of time trying to get money that meets the need. We made a really good down payment this year, but we will need budget increases for the next two fiscal years if we're really going to get the job done.

AK: By "Get the job done" what do you mean?

KC: End homelessness. Meaning that homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring. Folks are on the street and in shelters for a shortest time as possible. Our local goal is sixty days of fewer. Non-recurring meaning you're not coming in and out of homelessness. Rare meaning that we prevent homelessness whenever we can.

AK: That's all baked into the strategy.

KC: Mostly the Executive Director who works for the Mayor drafted this plan. All the members of the ICH, the advocates, people who have experienced homelessness, service providers, then we all voted on the plan and we adopted it on March of 2015.

AK: There's a host of, this city's infamous for them, acronyms of governing bodies. It's an amazing coordinated effort

KC: You brought up the exact reason why we have the ICH. So many agencies touch folks experiencing homelessness for instance: The Office of the State Superintendent of education, the Department of Human Services, The Department of Housing Community and Development, Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services, Department of Health. I think those are the major ones. I probably missed a couple. Almost all programs require some sort of identification. For federal funded programs have to have identification. Homeless folks move around a lot so

they often lose their driver's license or they never had a copy of their birth certificate. Just in terms of getting someone ready for housing and the paperwork they need we have to talk with the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) we need a photo ID. They often don't have a birth certificate. You have to work with the office of Vital Records. Just very small things have an inter-agency component. Larger things do too. There's housing that's built by the department of housing and development, public housing managed by D.C. Housing.

AK: Who comprises the ICH?

KC: There are a lot of government agency directors or right underneath the agency directors who can make decisions for their agency. There are providers of homeless services, a number of people who serve youth, families, and individuals. We try to get a good representation. Advocates are folks like me, we get absolutely no money from the government, that's part of our role. Folks who have experienced homelessness or are experienced homelessness.

AK: One of which we were just talking about, Reggie Black. Who is Reggie Black? Reggie Black:

KC: Reggie Black is a *Street Sense* vendor, artist, and member of the Interagency Homelessness Council. He has experienced homelessness himself.

Reggie Black (Guest): We're in the Martin Luther King memorial library. When you actually live through something, it ends up being something you care about. It's a part of your life. If you became homeless, somehow, I have no doubt in some capacity you'd be involved. Advocates are needed. The community is needed to talk about what works and what haven't worked.

AK: What is the winter plan?

KC: In the District of Columbia, the law requires that everyone be offered shelter when the weather falls below thirty two degrees or is forecasted to fall below thirty two degrees. The winter plan lays out how we are going to fulfil this law. We are going to keep people who are unhoused safe during winter weather. It talks about transportation, where we will shelter folks, where we will shelter folks if we run out of space in the current shelter, how we'll help youth who are too young to qualify for shelter. Pretty much it's our whole plan for the winter months.

AK: What are some efforts of methods that are used when we hit, for example a cold winter alert? How is the plan enacted?

KC: There's two levels of alert. There's a hypothermia alert and there's a cold weather alert. A cold weather alert is when it's much colder and more resources come online. During a hypothermia alert, shelters are open hours they might not normally be open like during the day. Shelters for a single run on a "7 to 7" basis. If tomorrow is forecasted to be hypothermic that shelter would be open until the hypothermic weather passed. There is a schedule of transportation, there's emergency transportation provided. Folks can call the hotline. If you

leave your office and you see someone you can call and someone will come and try to come and try to encourage that person to come to a shelter or give them a blanket and hot soup.

AK: There's another organization that I had not heard of, not that by any means an expert in local government but the *United Planning Organization*.

KC: Yes, they manage the shelter hotline and the van system.

AK: Ok.

KC: They are a non-profit organization.

AK: Are these those cargo vans you see running around the city that say, "D.C. Shelter hotline?"

KC: Yes.

AK: Reggie Blac:

Reggie Black: One of the things you first learn living on the street is that there is a hotline you can call and that starts the process if you wanna take that further into the official meetings or something, that's up to that person. The first contact is actually trying to call the van or trying to secure shelter. I remember my first time encountering a UPO shuttle was because a rec center was closed for the holiday. It was an alert night shelter and it was closed. They had to transfer us to a bigger facility. That my first time ever seeing the van before. I heard about it, never seen one. I have flagged down the van a couple of times. I said I had my own blankets and stuff. Your first contact is the outreach. From there it kind of evolved into going to the meetings where they make the winter plan. I found this is a good way to get the community to talk about the services they weren't getting and what's really happening on the street.

AK: So deploying the vans, and there used to be warming busses. They would idle in different places around the city and they would try to get people to come in when the weather is deemed according to the *National Weather Service* to be below freezing. Those then got displaced by overnight warming centers.

KC: There's two things. There is a hypothermia alert, and then there is a cold weather emergency alert. A cold weather emergency alert, i'm looking right now at my winter plan because I didn't exactly remember, is fifteen degrees or below including wind chill, or it's twenty degrees with wind chill and it's raining for sixty minutes or snow accumulation of at least three inches, or other conditions that are deemed dangerous. Homeland Security and *Emergency Management Administration*, critical part of the winter plan particularly. Their the ones who monitor the weather. We have our shelter that is open year-round.

Reggie Black: We're actually talking about the threshold between life and death. You can reach hypothermic conditions in temperatures as high as forty two degrees with moisture and wind

chill. Someone could actually die. Forty degree weather, rain, and a wind chill, spells refrigerator type conditions. You imagine yourself in a refrigerator, and you're wet. That's a problem. People think that hypothermia is frostbite. No. Hypothermia can settle in without frostbite. That's just one of the extreme stages of hypothermia, is that you're getting frostbite, that all of this is numb. Hypothermia is your core hemoglobin temperature dropping below a certain point. That can happen with temperatures as high as forty two degrees with a wind chill. You won't freeze, per say. You won't be hot enough to functioning. Organ after organ begins to shut down. You then finally drift to sleep, that's actually unconsciousness. Now your brain's not getting anything, it's not pumping any blood, is not pumping any oxygen, it's temperature is not regulated, and boom you're gone. It's kinda strange that places like Florida kick in their hypothermia at forty five degrees. We don't wait to activate anything until the temperature, including the windchill is thirty two and below. To me it's too low.

KC: To me, we have a lot of people who are outside a lot but then come in during hypothermia alerts and during cold weather alerts. Shelter can be unsafe, there can be a lot of complaints about violence. There's also lots of complaints of sanitary conditions, bed bugs and things like that. Our shelter system is pretty rigid. A married opposite sex couple can't go into shelter together. Many people feel more secure staying with their partner, and they feel they can't do that. You also can't bring your pets into shelter. Many homeless people have told me that their pets are their friends. This may be the only friends they have right now. Giving that up to come in a shelter is a pretty big deal. Some other jurisdictions have been experimenting with different models, including models that are much more flexible. Where people can bring their pets in, and people can share rooms with their partners. That has been more successful getting people to come inside.

[Music]

RB: The plan looks good on paper, but there are so many holes and cracks in the plan, that I think the community needs to give input. One of the biggest things that I think is strange to me is when the alerts are called off. There's no transportation, at all. The alert shuts down, everything shuts down. They say the alert's deactivated, the transportation, there's no shelter, you're on your own. I think that should be part of our winter plan. I'm trying to find a way to push for that. Those things are semantic things. If you are going to call the alert off, how are you going to pay the employees? How are you going to have the vans out on the street? How are they going to be gassed up and ready to transport people? How many vans do you need to transport people from the shelter? A two o'clock alert deactivation really puts people in a hard spot. They just end up going outside and standing in in line until about seven o'clock. Three, four five, six. Going in line and you might not even get inside the building until about seven thirty because of all the people. I think that's a major problem. I tried to raise that issue as much as I can during the winter planning phase. Another thing is that sometimes we have these communication breakdowns. Those can happen any given day. I sat there and I watched this. I think 2013. We're obviously standing outside, waiting for a van. It never shows at the time it's supposed to show. We're sitting there like, "Well where's the van?" They would say that this person or this shelter said there were no more residents outside. "Huh?" "We're outside." The community really needs to get into those planning meetings and really drill down on a lot of these issues.

Drill down on what times, when and what circumstances they are not being served. Not so much these are the services we provide during the winter. They need to know these gaps and holes. Cause we're talking about a life here.

[Music]

AK: How does the ICH measure the efficacy of the winter plan?

KC: Well we have feedback sessions every year and the end of the year where we ask the clients directly how things worked for you. If you were waiting for a van did the van come? Were there sufficient van capacity? Was there sufficient capacity at the shelter where you went? We also ask providers. Often times someone at Miriam's Kitchen will be helping a client and they hear some complaint that the shelter bus route time is completely off and the person had to stand outside in the cold for an hour. We also ask providers. We also look at the number of people who die because of hypothermic weather. It's difficult because it's not sure if someone was homeless or not. This is something that the ICH is working with medical examiner's offices to better keep track and to measure moving forward.

AK: Do you know how many people who died last year?

KC: It's here in the plan, but the problem is we don't know how many people were homeless.

AK: Got it.

KC: That's where the data improvement needs to happen.

AK: They may have died on the street or outside, But we don't know.

KC: A person with dementia may have come outside and because of their dementia they may freeze to death. Often it may take months to identify who someone is. They might not have identification on them. That's something the ICH is working on. The ICH plan is a huge step forward. It was passed in March. It puts us all on the same page. Providers, advocates, folks experiencing homelessness. It lays out a vision and really concrete steps how to get there. Last year's budget was an incredible down payment on the plan. 44 million dollar budget for homeless services. That doesn't include a lot of our housing programs. So i'm feeling pretty good. The budget comes out at the end of March. That will be a big test for how well the plan is moving forward.

AK: Do all the different agencies contribute something? Or is that? Where does that come from?

KC: All of the money is actually in the same pot. Whether it comes from DHS or DCHA. If it's for this purpose, then all of the money comes from the big pot. It pays for everything we do from police to the fire department. It doesn't matter to us specifically what agency it is. DHS has it within their budget. It often makes sense to put everything in one agency's budget because it's easier for transparency and tracking versus different agencies have slightly different ways of doing things. That's all out of DHS's budget.

AK: There seems to be more enthusiasm about the efforts taken on by this administration as opposed to recent administrations. Is that fair or accurate?

KC: We are very happy with the direction things are going in. It's been a very collaborative way through the *Inter Agency Council of Homelessness*. The ICH used to not have any staff so it was very difficult to get things done. Now we have incredible staff people that help get problems solved. These I'm sure are things that from the outside look very easy to fix but it's not easy to fix. We're worried about federal law related to national securities. For instance, it used to be to get into the office of vital records you needed to have a picture ID. You needed to get to the office of vital records to get your birth certificate so you could get a picture ID. So fixing those things and understanding why those policies are in place and how we can work around them. That takes staff time. It also takes the community coming together to figure out what the federal law says and what we can do to work around it.

AK: I'm interested in this because for anybody who would argue against trying to house people for whatever reason. There's a lot of data out there saying that we're actually paying more money collectively and it's in everybody's best interests to house folks instead of paying for all of these emergency services.

KC: Oh you're absolutely right. You have to do both. All of the housing we need we can't get online in one year, right? We can't build one thousand apartments in one year. We need much more than a thousand apartments. The plan lays out how we can start investing in more housing and cut back on some of these emergency services. Particularly having fewer shelter beds.

AK: There was something I read. This might even be from the strategic plan. When one has stable housing, we all benefit. Why is that?

KC: If you send your kids to school with kids who are homeless, those kids who are homeless are probably struggling with moving around to different schools, or having stability to get there everyday. Not only your kid may be stressed that their classmate and friend doesn't have a safe place to stay, but it also affects the child's ability to learn. Since we all pay taxes, we are all paying the school system to clean up problems that needs to be cleaned up by the homeless services system when people have housing problems. I find people in D.C. It's not a hard sell. When I tell people what I do, most people say, "What can I do about Joe who's living outside of my building? I've talked to him, bring him food sometimes, but I don't know how to get him housing. How do I do that?" I think we feel distress. I think people feel distressed when I walk outside. I don't know if you came here from the metro but, there are a number of people who sleep right outside of this office. I see it everyday and I think, "It's terrible." No one should have to sleep outside.

AK: If you could wave a wand and you had one wish for the city, I'll give you two if you want, what would those wishes be?

KC: That no one was homeless. That we had enough housing for everyone that needed it. The second is I work on temporary assistance for those who need it, D.C.'s *Welfare to Work* program. 6,500 families with 13,000 kids are said to be cut off from the program in October and the Mayor and the Council don't act. I wish that all children in our city had what they need to succeed.

KC: My name is Kate Coventry, and you're listening to *Sounds From the Street*.

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