

Dear Mayor O'Connell, Nashville Electric Service, Office of Emergency Management, Metro Water Services, Winter Storm Response Commission, and Metro Council Members,

Purpose of This Letter

On behalf of the Shelter Weather Outreach and Prevention (SWOP) Committee of Nashville's Continuum of Care, we write in response to Winter Storm Fern and its impact on some of Nashville's most vulnerable neighbors. Members of this committee work every day to serve people experiencing homelessness and witnessed firsthand the effects of this storm on individuals and families experiencing housing instability.

The intent of this letter is to share observations from providers who responded during the storm and to offer recommendations that may strengthen coordination and response for people experiencing homelessness during future extreme weather events.

Impact of Winter Storm Fern

Extreme weather events consistently have disproportionate and life-threatening impacts on people experiencing homelessness, and Winter Storm Fern was no exception.

The storm affected individuals across the full spectrum of housing instability, including families, youth and young adults, survivors of interpersonal violence, veterans, and individuals with significant medical and behavioral health needs. These populations face heightened risk during extreme weather and rely on coordinated systems of care for safety.

Winter Storm Fern affected residents across multiple housing situations, including:

- Individuals who are unsheltered and living outdoors
- Residents staying in Nashville's emergency shelters
- Individuals served through Metro's overflow shelter system
- Individuals and families safely housed through nonprofit programs who experienced prolonged power outages and service disruptions

Positive Elements of the Response

We recognize and appreciate the extensive efforts made across Metro agencies and community partners to respond to this emergency, including the leadership of Metro's Office of Homeless Services Department in coordinating many elements of Nashville's homelessness response system and supporting providers during the storm.

Providers identified several aspects of the response that worked well. The decision to keep Metro's overflow shelter open 24 hours a day, coordinated through the Office of Homeless Services and community partners, and the addition of another overflow location helped reduce crowding and provided critical safety during the storm. Transportation assistance to shelters and warming centers was helpful when available, and many respondents noted the dedication of nonprofit staff, volunteers, and community partners who mobilized quickly to support those in need.

Challenges Identified by Providers

At the same time, providers identified several areas where the response could be strengthened.

Communication was one of the most frequently cited challenges. Providers reported difficulty accessing timely, consistent information across agencies and systems regarding shelter availability, which shelters were appropriate for different populations, transportation options, power outages and restoration timelines, and other operational changes during the storm. These information gaps created confusion and increased stress for people already navigating crisis conditions and highlight the importance of clear, real-time communication during emergency response.

Transportation and utility disruptions also limited access to safety during the storm. Some individuals experiencing homelessness were unable to reach warming shelters or other safe locations due to icy roads, limited transit service, or a lack of clear information about transportation options. Providers also reported prolonged power outages affecting residential programs and individuals who had recently transitioned into housing. Families lost food due to power loss, and some residents with serious medical conditions feared losing access to life-sustaining equipment. Many providers also indicated that their programs or participants were not treated as priority sites for service restoration during the storm.

In conversations about vulnerable populations and critical service restoration, providers reported that people experiencing homelessness and the organizations serving them were too often overlooked.

As one SWOP member shared:

“My families are navigating most of these challenges on a daily basis, where will they sleep, are they safe, where can they get the support they really need?”

Extreme weather events like Winter Storm Fern intensify the already significant risks faced by people experiencing homelessness, making coordination, communication, and prioritization of services even more critical. Ensuring that people experiencing homelessness and the systems supporting them are fully integrated into emergency response planning is essential to protecting public health, safety, and community stability across Nashville.

As Metro Nashville evaluates its response to Winter Storm Fern, we respectfully urge you to intentionally assess how people experiencing homelessness were served during this emergency and to identify specific steps to strengthen how this population is included in future extreme weather planning and response.

Recommendations to Strengthen Future Extreme Weather Response

As Metro Nashville evaluates its response to Winter Storm Fern, we offer the following recommendations to strengthen coordination and safety for people experiencing homelessness during future extreme weather events.

1. Prioritize Homeless Service Providers as Critical Referral Sites for Power Restoration

Nonprofit and government organizations providing emergency shelter, transitional housing, permanent supportive housing, and other residential services to people experiencing homelessness should be formally designated as priority or critical service sites for NES power restoration during extreme weather events. This designation would help ensure continuity of essential services and prevent displacement or increased risk for individuals who rely on these programs for safety and stability.

2. Improve Real-Time Communication with Service Providers

During extreme weather events, providers need timely, consistent updates regarding shelter availability, which shelters are appropriate for different populations, transportation resources, power outages and restoration timelines, and other operational changes. Establishing clear, coordinated communication channels between emergency response partners and frontline providers would improve coordination and reduce confusion during emergency response.

3. Strengthen Transportation Access During Extreme Weather

Transportation remains a significant barrier for individuals experiencing homelessness during severe weather events. Expanding transportation coordination to shelters and warming centers, and clearly communicating available transportation options, would help ensure individuals can safely reach available resources.

4. Include Homeless Service Providers in Emergency Planning

Organizations serving people experiencing homelessness should be included in emergency planning discussions and coordination efforts. Providers have firsthand knowledge of the risks facing this population and can help inform more effective and equitable emergency response strategies.

Closing

We appreciate your leadership and your commitment to evaluating Nashville's response to Winter Storm Fern. The SWOP Committee stands ready to partner with Metro agencies, NES, and the Winter Storm Response Commission to strengthen planning, coordination, and response efforts moving forward.

We welcome the opportunity to share additional insights from providers serving people experiencing homelessness and to participate in future planning discussions to help ensure that Nashville's extreme weather response fully includes people experiencing homelessness.

We believe that with thoughtful planning and collaboration, Nashville can ensure that no resident, especially those experiencing homelessness, is overlooked during future emergency responses.

With appreciation,
Shelter Weather Outreach and Prevention (SWOP) Committee
Nashville Continuum of Care

List Committee Members Signing On