

Considering Hosting a Warming Center?

A Conversation Guide for Congregations & Community Organizations

Every winter, members of our community face dangerous cold-weather conditions without safe indoor shelter.

Congregations and community organizations across Knoxville-Knox County play an important role in helping protect vulnerable neighbors during extreme weather by providing temporary overnight warming-center accommodations.

If your organization is interested in learning more, this guide is designed to help start the conversation.

Why Does Knox County Need Warming Centers?

Our community utilizes a layered winter response system that includes:

- year-round emergency shelter,
- seasonal overnight shelter,
- and temporary emergency surge capacity through warming centers.

This layered approach helps the community respond flexibly during severe weather while maintaining sustainable operations across the winter season.

What Is a Temporary Overnight Warming Center?

A warming center is a temporary overnight site that opens during periods of dangerous cold weather to provide additional indoor shelter capacity.

Warming centers:

- supplement existing shelters,
- operate during extreme cold conditions,
- and rely heavily on volunteers and community partnerships.

They are different from:

- year-round emergency shelters,
- permanent housing programs,
- or full-season nightly shelters.

Common Questions Congregations Ask

Would we have to open every night?

No.

Warming centers activate only when the National Weather Service forecast meets Knox County's activation threshold of **25°F or below**.

Temporary warming centers are designed to provide emergency surge capacity during the coldest and most dangerous weather events, not to function as full-time shelters throughout the winter season.

While activation varies from year to year, warming centers typically operate for approximately **2–4 weeks total over the course of an entire winter season (Dec 1 – Feb 28)**.

Would we be doing this alone?

No.

The Office of Housing Stability (OHS) helps coordinate:

- communications,
- transportation,
- volunteer support,
- training,
- operational coordination,
- facility security,
- and connections to community partners.

Many warming-center sites also partner with neighboring congregations, civic groups, and volunteers.

In addition, warming-center partners participate in a seasonal Warming Center Committee that meets regularly throughout the winter season to:

- share operational updates,
- troubleshoot challenges,
- coordinate planning,
- exchange ideas and resources,
- and support one another during activations.

This collaborative network helps ensure organizations are not navigating winter response efforts alone.

Is this safe?

Approved sites participate in a review and approval process coordinated with:

- the Knoxville Fire Department,

- Fire Marshal's Office,
- and OHS.

This process helps ensure:

- safe occupancy limits,
- clear emergency exits,
- and safe overnight operations.

Would we need showers?

No.

Many temporary overnight warming centers operate successfully without showers.

Are warming centers expected to provide food or meals to guests?

Providing food is encouraged but is not required. Many warming centers choose to offer light refreshments such as coffee, hot chocolate, water, snacks, or simple meals to help guests stay comfortable during their stay. Centers may partner with local churches, community groups, restaurants, or volunteers to donate food and supplies. Mobile Meals can provide individually packaged and frozen meals. Any food provided should be handled and served in accordance with applicable food safety guidelines. The level of food service offered can vary based on the center's capacity, resources, and volunteer support.

How many people would we host?

Capacity depends on:

- building layout,
- available sleeping space,
- restroom access,
- and fire/life-safety review.

Many successful warming-center models intentionally operate at relatively small overnight capacities, ranging from 15-100.

What about liability or insurance?

Organizations interested in participating are encouraged to discuss any questions with their insurance provider.

As part of the approval process, organizations also coordinate with local officials regarding temporary overnight operational considerations and life-safety requirements.

What Makes a Good Warming Center Site?

Potential sites often include:

- fellowship halls,
- classrooms,
- gym/activity centers,
- community rooms,
- or other flexible gathering spaces.

Helpful features include:

- adequate heating,
- restroom access,
- safe emergency exits,
- overnight volunteer capacity,
- parking or transportation access,
- and willingness to coordinate operationally.

What Does a Typical Activation Night Look Like?

While each site operates somewhat differently, a typical activation may include:

- Evening volunteer setup
- Guest arrival and check-in
- Dinner or snacks
- Overnight indoor shelter
- Morning cleanup and check-out

Many congregations describe the experience as relational and community-oriented, centered around hospitality, safety, and dignity.

- Church Street UMC shared with us about one warming center guest who is now a meaningful part of their church family.
- Eternal Life Harvest Center shares how helpful it was to have other churches come alongside them to partner in the effort. For example, Fountain City UMC utilized their church van to offer transportation.
- Cokesbury UMC has developed a partnership with other Methodist churches who help provide meals, volunteers, and other donations to the effort.

Similar models, such as Nashville's Room In The Inn program, have successfully operated through congregation-based winter shelter partnerships for decades.

What Does the Approval Process Look Like?

Organizations interested in becoming approved warming centers generally move through the following process:

1. Initial Interest

An organization contacts the Office of Housing Stability (OHS) to express interest in becoming a temporary emergency warming center.

2. Informational Materials

OHS provides an informational packet and answers initial operational questions.

3. Operational Conversation

If interested in moving forward, the organization works with OHS to discuss:

- facility layout,
- operational capacity,
- volunteer considerations,
- and potential next steps.

4. Initial Fire Marshal Inspection

OHS coordinates an initial inspection with the Knoxville Fire Department Fire Marshal's Office to verify the building meets applicable code requirements for its primary use.

5. Temporary Operational Review

OHS coordinates a follow-up review with a Fire Suppression and Life Safety Engineer regarding temporary overnight warming-center operations, including:

- emergency egress,
- occupancy considerations,
- sleeping arrangements,
- and operational safety.

6. Approval & Occupancy Guidance

Once approved, the organization receives a temporary-use permit and approved occupancy guidance for warming-center operations.

Ways Organizations Can Support the Cold-Weather Response

Not every organization needs to operate a warming center to make an impact.

Community partners can also support the winter response through:

- volunteer teams,
- meal sponsorship,
- supply drives,
- transportation assistance,
- overnight volunteer support,
- laundry assistance,
- or partnerships with existing warming-center sites.

A Community Effort

Knoxville-Knox County's winter response works because many different parts of the community contribute together, including:

- congregations,
- nonprofits,
- volunteers,
- healthcare partners,
- transportation partners,
- and local government coordination.

No single organization carries the responsibility alone.

Interested in Learning More?

Organizations interested in exploring participation are encouraged to contact the Office of Housing Stability to learn more about:

- warming-center operations,
- approval processes,
- volunteer opportunities,
- and ways to support the community winter response.

Organizations are welcome to reach out simply to learn more or ask questions. No commitment is required to begin the conversation.

Website: knoxtnhousing.org

Email: katie.mcilwain@knoxtnhousing.org

Phone: 865-310-9483