

Code Blue Testimony by Robin Weinstein

March 3, 2016

Good afternoon. I am honored to be here today to support the efforts of Assemblymen Andrzejczak and Land, along with Senator Van Drew, regarding implementing a state-wide Code Blue program to provide emergency shelter to our homeless neighbors during cold winter nights. My name is Robin Weinstein and I am the Pastor of Bethany Grace Community Church in Bridgeton, NJ; President and Founder of the M25 Initiative, a nonprofit that supports Code Blue in Cumberland County; and the Chair and Co-Founder of the Cumberland County Code Blue Coalition.

The Code Blue program is not a novel concept, but sadly it is not a widely known program. The unfamiliarity of Code Blue, along with the ambiguity of definitions, roles/responsibilities, and legal liabilities, contribute to a fragmented implementation of Code Blue throughout New Jersey.

In Cumberland County, Code Blue is now in its third season. The program was created to provide "Warming Centers" as a way for homeless persons in the community to find shelter from frigid overnight temperatures during the cold winter months. Local churches on a rotating basis host warming Centers to provide temporary relief for our homeless neighbors.

Code Blue is a *grassroots movement* of churches and community members responding to the needs of our homeless neighbors. Code Blue is funded by community contributions made to the M25 Initiative (501c3).

Within Cumberland County, Code Blue is declared to be in effect when temperatures are predicted to be 25 degrees or below with no precipitation for at least two consecutive overnight hours OR 32 degrees or below with precipitation for at least two consecutive overnight hours according to the National Weather Service.

The Code Blue Steering Committee has designated Bridgeton Mayor Albert Kelly to be the government official who, in consultation with government officials and the Code Blue Program Chair, determines if a Code Blue should be activated for all municipalities.

We currently have over 200 registered volunteers who have attended trainings and background checks. Our Code Blue program has received regional and national attention. I am glad that, in part, it has helped contribute to an awareness of a need on a statewide level.

In regards to the specifics of the bill, I applaud the spirit of the legislation, but believe that it needs revisions to ensure its successful adoption and implementation. First, I believe that communities should be empowered to choose whether this should be a grassroots community-based program or a government program. Whenever possible, I believe that government should seek to equip and empower individuals and communities in this endeavor, rather than assuming the principal role.

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To further this end, the legislation should address liability to churches, civic groups, and volunteers to limit exposure. Many times, groups are not inclined to get involved because of fears related to regulatory and insurance requirements. Recognizing that Code Blue is an emergency response, Good Samaritan legislation should be included in this bill to protect those who want to assist their neighbors in need.

Government agencies should be required to assist volunteer efforts, when requested, and should assist in planning for the long-term sustainability of the programs. The planning should include a back-up system to be in place during inclement weather conditions that prevent volunteers from driving to shelters.

The temperature of 40 degrees indicated in the legislation is noble, but not feasible for most operations because this would include a majority of the winter months. Most Code Blue programs follow similar guidelines to that of the Cumberland County Code Blue Coalition. Considering that Code Blue requires sufficient resources of financial and human capital, the legislation needs to be amended in what it constitutes as a cold weather emergency.

On behalf of the Cumberland County Code Blue Coalition and the M25 Initiative, thank you for hearing this bill. We welcome your partnership and support in advancing a state-wide standard for caring for our homeless neighbors.