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TESTING IN CITY SHELTER INDICATES VIRTUALLY NO CORONAVIRUS SPREAD; SUCCESS ATTRIBUTED TO PROTOCOLS AND PRECAUTIONS

NORTHAMPTON, MA - Testing conducted this week at the city's shelter for homeless individuals at Northampton High School indicated minimal presence of COVID-19.

"I am incredibly pleased with these results," said Northampton Health Department Director Merridith O'Leary, "We've seen some shelters in other parts of the state where testing has indicated positive rates as high as 40 to 60 percent. Northampton has succeeded in the main mission of its shelter - to slow the transmission of disease to a near stop among this population." O'Leary attributed the low positive count to Northampton's rapid embrace of the public health imperative to shelter homeless people during a pandemic, the hard work and execution of the city's Emergency Response Team, the social distancing and hygiene protocols in place at NHS, and the full cooperation with protocols from residents, shelter staff and volunteers. O'Leary added that because community transmission is currently elevated, city leadership, shelter staff, and residents must continue to be diligent to ensure the shelter maintains a healthy environment.

"I am incredibly proud of what the City of Northampton has accomplished with the shelter at Northampton High School," shared Mayor David Narkewicz, "We knew early on that we needed this resource for the safety of our most vulnerable residents who lack housing and that we had to move quickly. I am grateful to the Health Department, our Fire Rescue Department, the School Department, the Police Department, Central Services, and other key members of the city's Emergency Response Team for their work on this effort. I am thankful for our strong partners, ServiceNet, for their expert team's assistance in running the shelter, to the many dedicated community volunteers who've given their time, to Cooley Dickinson Hospital for providing tests and expediting the results, and to the many groups who have donated food, materials, and other necessities that made this life-saving resource possible."

On Tuesday, Dr. Jessica Bossie, physician for the Springfield-based Health Services for the Homeless, assisted by three nurses, administered tests to all shelter residents and ServiceNet staff working at the shelter. Cooley Dickinson Hospital provided testing supplies, personal protective equipment and created the testing system for the shelter. Results came back Wednesday.

The shelter opened April 1 to replace ServiceNet shelters on Grove Street and Center Street, where quarters were deemed too close to maintain adequate social distancing.

The high school shelter, being run cooperatively by the city's Department of Public Health, Medical Reserve Corps Coordinator, and ServiceNet, with support from Northampton's Fire Rescue and Police Departments and Cooley Dickinson Hospital, is spacious enough that residents and staff can follow proper social distancing and hand hygiene requirements.

O'Leary attributed this week's negative coronavirus test results to the following practices:

- Medical screening, including temperature checks upon acceptance at the shelter;
- Screening, including temperature-taking, twice a day for residents, volunteers and staff;
- Requirement of hand-washing and sanitizing upon entry;
- Mask requirements in all common areas except at meals;
- Social distancing signs and reminders to keep at least six feet apart;
- The placement of sleeping cots eight feet apart.

The shelter is not a lock-in shelter. Residents are allowed to come and go, though they are encouraged to remain on campus if possible. Common areas include the cafeteria where meals are provided and space for leisure time activities including movies, games and puzzles.

O'Leary attributed the shelter's success to the strong partnership created by Cooley Dickinson, which supplied the testing equipment and created the system for testing and result reading, the city, and ServiceNet, as well as other community support. Meals are provided by Smith College and the Hampshire County Jail and House of Corrections. The shelter is also supported by community donations, including McDonald's, which provides a meal a week, the Veterans Services Department, which provides a hot breakfast on Sunday mornings and an assortment of sundries donated by residents.

For more information, please contact:

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