



League of Women Voters of Portland

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Date: January 30, 2024

To: Multnomah County Commission
Chair Jessica Vega Pederson
Commissioners Beason, Brim-Edwards, Meieran, and Stegmann

From: League of Women Voters of Portland
Carolyn Buppert, president
Kathy Casto, Action Committee member

Re: Early Closure of Emergency Shelters on January 17, 2024

The League of Women Voters of Portland would like to express its deep concern about the early closure of emergency shelters during the recent winter storm. While we commend the County for sheltering a record 1,269 people in a single night, across twelve different sites, the January 17 midday closures forced people onto icy streets in sub-freezing temperatures. Further, shuttered public libraries and curtailed TriMet services meant that hundreds simply had nowhere to go.

We appreciate the County's efforts to plan early for severe weather and to provide staffing and supplies rapidly. We understand that the decision to close the shelters was based on an overly optimistic weather forecast and lack of adequate staffing. As usual, adopted policy and established thresholds determine when shelters are available to people in need.

However, the situation on the ground called for greater flexibility (and compassion) about the timing of demobilization. The thresholds to open shelters should be distinguished from thresholds to close them, when impacts from extreme weather have changed the conditions into which people are returning. Clackamas County kept their shelters open days longer; what could we learn from their decision-making?

We also support better coordination with the City of Portland to ensure that shelters are fully staffed during severe weather or other emergency events.

The League supports people's right to "services sufficient to meet their basic needs for food, shelter and access to health care." Multnomah County stepped up to meet these needs during the recent storm, but in closing shelters early, failed to ensure the safety of some of its most vulnerable residents.

League of Women Voters of Portland:

To promote political responsibility through informed and active participation in government.