

Somerville Warming Center

Executive Summary

June 13, 2024

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Overview

The Somerville Warming Center Rapid Improvement Training and After-Action Workshop was conducted on June 6, 2024. This workshop aimed to capture lessons learned from the 2024 Winter Warming Center operations, identify rapid improvements for implementation ahead of the next winter, and prioritize actions while documenting planned changes. The workshop included city officials involved in the warming center operations.

Goals

1. **Capture lessons learned** from the City of Somerville 2024 Winter Warming Center
2. **Identify rapid improvements** that can be implemented ahead of next winter
3. **Prioritize actions** and document planned changes

Key Takeaways

The workshop began with a welcome and introductions, followed by an overview of the agenda and workbook. Attendees included various city officials involved in the operations. The main sessions included Rapid Improvement 101, a Discovery Workshop, and the conclusion with a commitment to action. The workshop used the EasyRetro platform for real-time collaboration.

The discussion centered around 3 main areas of focus. First, Action Tracking which included the request for information the city received from the public and elected officials and the internal requests for resources and staff for the center's operation. Next, Warm Center Operations which included the physical set-up, staff and procedures used at the center. Finally, Public Information includes communication with guests, neighbors, tenants, elected officials, and the public. Below are the main takeaways from each focus area.

Action Tracking

Key Findings:

- Requests for Information: There was a high volume of information requests from neighbors, the public, tenants, and council members. The process for tracking and responding to these requests was identified as needing improvement.

- Resource Requests: Requests for resources such as trash barrels and adjustments to contracts were frequent. The need for a more streamlined process to handle these was noted.
- After-Hours Communication: The lack of a designated after-hours contact led to confusion and inefficiencies. Establishing a clear after-hours protocol was deemed necessary.

Warming Center Operations

Key Findings:

- Operational Hours and Location: Discussions highlighted the challenges related to the operational hours and location of the warming center. Given the timing of other events at the Armory, there was a convergence of folks using various spaces.
- Security: The need for enhanced security measures both inside and outside the warming center was a significant concern. The contract with the security vendor should cover broader and more intensive security requirements.

Public Information


Key Findings:

- Public Understanding: There was confusion among the public about the difference between a warming center and a permanent shelter which lead to a misalignment in expectations.
- Communication with Stakeholders: The feedback indicated a need for more proactive communication with neighbors, tenants, and the general public.

Discussion

I. Action Tracking

During the workshop, a significant focus was placed on the challenges associated with action tracking. The need to improve the management of both information and resource requests was evident. Attendees shared experiences where numerous requests from neighbors, the public, tenants, and council members overwhelmed the system, causing delays and inefficiencies. A recurring issue was the lack of a clear after-hours communication protocol, which often left staff to address needs without a designated point of contact. As one participant noted, "There was no clear point of contact for after-hours issues, which led to confusion and delayed responses."



The discussion also highlighted the importance of implementing a comprehensive communication flowchart. This flowchart would delineate responsibilities, ensuring that all types of requests, whether for information or resources, are directed to the appropriate personnel promptly. A participant emphasized the need for a structured approach, stating, “Having a clear workflow will help us manage requests more efficiently and ensure that urgent issues are addressed swiftly.” Moreover, it was agreed that the contract with the warming center vendor should include provisions for after-hours point of contact to mitigate these issues in the future.

II. Warming Center Operations

The operational aspects of the warming center were another critical area of discussion. At the start of the discussion it was noted the overall success of the center in providing a safe, warm place for the unhoused community. The shelter was routinely full and the vendor noted the outreach to the unhoused informing them about the warming center was very successful. Additionally, the messaging around the closing of the shelter was noted as a success.

Participants also identified several pain points, including the adequacy of operational hours, and the need for enhanced security measures. The center's current hours posed challenges, particularly during peak times when demand was highest.

Security emerged as a paramount concern. The workshop revealed that the existing security arrangements were insufficient, particularly for managing the queue outside the center and ensuring the safety of both staff and guests during operational hours. The consensus was that future contracts with the vendor must cover more comprehensive and intensive security requirements, including around-the-clock presence and better crowd management.

In terms of improvements, the group discussed starting contract negotiations earlier to allow for more thorough scoping of requirements based on this year's lessons learned. This proactive approach would give vendors adequate time to meet the city's specific needs, particularly concerning security and operational logistics. The creation of a dedicated task force or team to manage these aspects was also proposed, ensuring that there is a consistent and focused effort to streamline warming center operations. It was determined the Task Force would comprise of City Departments directly responsible for the operations of the Warming Center which includes HHS, DPW, Emergency Management, ISD, 311, Mayor's Office, and Liaison to the Armory.

III. Public Information

Effective public communication was another vital discussion point, particularly in addressing the confusion among the public regarding the warming center's purpose. Many community members misunderstood the center's role, expecting it to function as a permanent shelter rather than a temporary warming facility. This misunderstanding led to numerous complaints and misaligned expectations. As one participant mentioned, "We need to do a better job of explaining what the warming center is and what it isn't. Clear, consistent communication is key."

The workshop participants discussed strategies to enhance public information dissemination. A significant recommendation was to develop a dedicated webpage for the warming center, which would include FAQs, operational details, and regular updates. This online resource would serve as a go-to information hub for the public, reducing the volume of repetitive inquiries directed at city staff.

Additionally, the importance of managing expectations through proactive communication campaigns was emphasized. These campaigns would involve engaging with the community through various channels, including social media, local news outlets, and community meetings. By providing transparent and timely information, the city can foster a better understanding and support for the warming center's operations.

Action Plan

This action plan provides a structured approach to address the key areas of action tracking, warming center operations, and public information. Each action item is designed to rapidly enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the warming center's operations and communication with the community.

Action Tracking

Action Item	Description	Responsible Party	Timeline
Develop Communication Flowchart	Create a detailed flowchart to manage and track requests for information and resources.	Task Force	2 months

Action Item	Description	Responsible Party	Timeline
Implement After-Hours Protocol	Establish a clear after-hours communication protocol and designate a point of contact.	Vendor, City Staff	1 month
Centralized Request System	Develop and deploy a centralized system for tracking and responding to requests.	311	4 months
Internal Communication	Regularly distribute email updates to the larger stakeholder group to keep departments informed of progress	Task Force	Ongoing

Warming Center Operations

Action Item	Description	Responsible Party	Timeline
Enhanced Security Measures	Expand the security contract to include comprehensive coverage, both inside and directly outside the warming center.	Procurement Team, Security Vendor	4 months
Task Force for Operational Management	Establish a dedicated task force to oversee warming center operations.	HHS, DPW, Emergency Management, ISD, 311, Mayor's Office, and Liaison to the Armory	1 month
Contract Early Engagement	Start contract negotiations earlier to allow ample preparation time for vendors.	Procurement Team, Vendor	3 months

Clear Operational Policies	Develop and communicate clear operational policies, including check-in/check-out procedures.	Task Force, Vendor	2 months
Regular Training for Staff	Implement regular training sessions for staff on de-escalation techniques and emergency protocols.	Task Force, Vendor	Ongoing

Public Information

Action Item	Description	Responsible Party	Timeline
Create Dedicated Webpage	Develop a webpage for the warming center with FAQs, operational details, and regular updates.	Communications Team	3 months
Proactive Communication Campaign	Launch a communication campaign to educate the public about the warming center's purpose and operations.	Communications Team	3 months
Community Engagement Sessions	Hold regular community meetings to gather feedback and provide updates on the warming center.	Task Force, Community Leaders	Ongoing
Develop Informational Materials	Create brochures, flyers, and other materials to distribute information about the warming center.	Communications Team	1 month
Establish Feedback Loop	Implement a system for collecting and responding to public feedback regularly.	Communications Team, Task Force	Ongoing

Acknowledgment

This report is one of many after-action reviews conducted to evaluate and improve the operations of the Somerville Warming Center. The focus of this report is intentionally limited in its scope, addressing specific areas identified during the Rapid Improvement Training and After-Action Workshop held on June 6, 2024. It aims to provide actionable insights and immediate recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of the warming center.

However, it is important to acknowledge that this report should not be viewed in isolation. It is a component of the broader, ongoing efforts to address the needs of Somerville's unhoused population. The findings and action items presented here are meant to complement long-term strategic planning and continuous improvement initiatives. By integrating these insights with other reviews and feedback, we can create a more comprehensive approach to support and serve our community effectively.

We extend our gratitude to all participants and stakeholders who contributed their time, expertise, and perspectives to this process. Your ongoing commitment and collaboration are essential as we strive to meet the complex and evolving needs of our community.