

Quick Guide Checklist for Churches Hosting a Warming Center

A. Vision & Leadership

- Define church leadership roles for Warming Center
 - Who will guide the church, the volunteers, and the general mission
- Create and approve messaging for congregation and community
- Ensure congregation is informed and supportive
- Check for conflicts with youth/daycare programming
- Consider holding info/training sessions after Sunday service
 - We will be providing training for leadership and volunteers this fall
 - Consider what you need volunteers to know about your Warming Center and other particulars that are important (more below)

B. Partnerships & Food

- Secure 3+ church partners for meals (breakfast, dinner, snacks)
 - We will work to support this as well
- Assess food storage capacity (refrigeration, dry storage)
- Delay food delivery until Warming Center dates are confirmed
- Invite your congregation and community to get involved volunteering, making meals, or donating tangible items
- Communicate roles and needs clearly to partner churches and to Warming Center Subcommittee for further assistance
- Having more people than normal on property may cause plumbing problems, consider having someone on standby or looking into alternative solutions for restrooms

C. Volunteer Management

- Assign a Volunteer Coordinator - a point person is essential!
- Determine volunteer registration method
 - Internal
 - United Way's Volunteer East TN Platform
 - This will still need to be managed by your church
- Set volunteer registration opening - we recommend beginning in October
- Create and share volunteer orientation and training materials
- Prepare volunteer check-in system and sign-in sheets
- Prepare liability/photo release forms (if applicable)
- Establish support plan: someone to greet, give passwords, answer questions
- Have volunteers come an hour before check-in to set up
 - This could be done by a youth group or other group, as there is lower level interaction with guests
 - Cots
 - Sleeping items - TBD (blankets, cots; recommendation coming later)
 - Dog crates
- Develop shift schedule. Our recommendation:
 - 6–9pm (check-in) - Busiest time

- 6pm–12am - Slow, consider 2 volunteers
- 12am–6am- Slow, consider 2 volunteers
- 6am–9am - Busiest time

D. Communication

- We recommend using GroupMe - it works with all government agencies so you can be added to the larger group messages as well
- Share communication expectations with staff and volunteers
- Share communication expectations with guests
 - Best practice is to present expectations verbally, as not everyone may be able to read

E. Space & Safety

- Designate sleeping space
- Designate and prep donation storage/organization area
- Assign a separate volunteer to manage donations - highly recommended
- Develop storage plan for medicine and weapons
- Establish a guest and item check-in/check-out policy
- Make a decision on keeping doors open longer if temps stay below 25°F in the morning
- Consider bathrooms, 2 bathrooms for 30 people is even tricky
- Make sure volunteers have keys to doors that lock, in case a guest locks themselves into a room that is open, such as the bathroom
- Strongly suggest that guests cannot leave the premises once they are in
 - Suggest 1-2 smoke breaks in a contained area where 1 volunteer and the security guard come with
 - Strongly suggest that guests cannot go to their car or anywhere off the property.
 - If they want to leave, they are allowed to leave but remind them they cannot come back in if they leave the premises, even if it is to go to their car

Timeline for Launching a Warming Center

Timeline	Tasks
August	Meet with leadership, plan messaging, assess space needs
October	Secure food partners, start volunteer recruitment planning
October	Open volunteer registration, set up communication platform
10 days before	Confirm storage and donation plan, draft shift schedule
October	Share info with congregation, confirm partner church support
3 days before	Finalize food delivery dates, confirm volunteer assignments
1 day before	Walkthrough with key staff/volunteers, test communication methods

Day of	Volunteer check-in, meal coordination, guest intake, donation check-in
Afterward	Debrief with leadership, thank volunteers and partners, gather feedback

Training Document for Volunteers & Churches

Please note there are trainings on the county website

Section 1: Welcome & Purpose

- Mission of the Warming Center
- Role of the church
- Importance of hospitality and safety

Section 2: Volunteer Roles & Expectations

- Set Up
- Greeters
- Overnight hosts
- Meal servers
- Donation organizers
- Morning check-out
- Tear down (if necessary) & clean up

Section 3: Shift Guidelines

- Overview of shift times
- What to expect on shift
- How to communicate issues (contact info, Slack instructions)

Section 4: Safety & Logistics

- Emergency contact procedures
- Rules around storage of medicine and weapons
- Guest check-in/check-out process
- Where to find supplies, bathrooms, and bedding
- If willing and able to store medication, have a lockbox
 - Do not disperse to clients as this can be a liability.
- Suggest having a needle box on property, preferably in bathroom

Section 5: Values & Boundaries

- Trauma-informed care basics
- Do's and don'ts for working with guests
- When to ask for help

Section 6: Forms & Checklists

- Volunteer sign-in
- Release forms (if used)
- Incident report form
- Donation intake log
- Referral request form

Section 7: Warming Center Active

1. Volunteer Arrival & Set-Up (1 hour before doors open)
 - Assign roles: weapons/medicine check, hospitality, dinner, bags, cots, pet crates
 - Prepare space and welcome area
 - i. Cots
 - ii. Dog crates
2. Guest Check-In
 - Explain key rules: no re-entry after check-in, final smoke break, patio only
 - Self-selected weapons and medication check-in
 - Ask about: items from car, pillow/blanket, storage of bags
 - Note: some guests come just for food and then sleep in cars with pets
3. Welcome & Orientation
 - Group welcome: expectations of guests and hosts
 - Acknowledge some may sleep through it due to exhaustion
4. Quiet Hours & Overnight
 - Lights down, volunteers monitor from lobby
 - No re-entry allowed for safety
 - Occasionally handle latecomers or guests who leave early
 - One supervised smoke break overnight
5. Morning Routine
 - Gradual lights-on around 6am
 - Quiet breakfast and coffee service
 - Return stored weapons/medications

Section 8: Debriefing volunteers

- Use recommended debrief materials to ensure volunteers have space to process their experience

Warming Center Safety Self-Audit Checklist

Complete before each opening & review mid-season

Facility:

- Two clear fire exits
- Fire extinguishers accessible
- Smoke detectors working
- Emergency lighting/flashlights available
- Sleeping areas do not block exits

Guest Safety:

- Guest-to-volunteer ratio (e.g., 1:10)
- At least one trained CPR/Narcan person on site
- Secure area for medications if needed
- Plan for conflict/de-escalation
- Pet policy known & communicated

General Operations:

- Waivers available for volunteers
- Emergency contact info posted
- Referral info available for guests (day centers, family shelters)
- Sign-in system for guests and volunteers
- Personal belongings policy shared