

# Drop-In Center Relocation FAQs

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## Why did the Drop-In Center need to move?

When the Governor declared a Public Health Emergency due to the novel coronavirus outbreak, it was necessary to rapidly find a new home for the Drop-in Center. The former location in Old Town was too small to accommodate the social distance that is necessary during a pandemic. Bellingham Public Schools graciously stepped forward to offer Bellingham High School as a short-term site. The Drop-In Center was housed there from late March until mid-July.

The status quo is not an option. Since Covid-19 will likely remain a threat to our community into the coming school year, it was necessary to find a more enduring location for the Drop-in Center. Approximately 160-170 guests stayed each night at the Drop-In Center at Bellingham High School and these numbers have stayed consistent at the new Drop-In Center location, now called “Base Camp.” The Whatcom County Health Department has provided guidelines to reduce the risk of a COVID-19 outbreak at the shelter(s) and protect the community at large. If the Drop-In Center had moved back to its original Old Town location, the space could only accommodate 50 individuals per night under these new public health guidelines. That would mean 110 people would lose their shelter and have to sleep outside.

## Why do we need a Drop-in Center in the first place?

At Bellingham High School, the Drop-in Center provided a safe, supportive 24-hour environment with next-step opportunities to 475 unique individuals. Without the Drop-in Center, these individuals would have had nowhere else to stay. That would be unacceptable for our community. Additionally, the law requires that if the City seeks to enforce certain ordinances against public camping, people who are experiencing homelessness need a place to stay. In order to keep our public spaces clean and orderly, we need a place where anyone who needs shelter can find it.

## But won't all those people congregating in one place just spread the disease?

No guests at Lighthouse Mission Ministries (LMM) have yet to test positive for Covid-19, thanks in part to additional measures taken to create physical distancing at the Drop-In Center and the new Base Camp location. LMM is carefully following health and safety protocols that were developed in consultation with the Whatcom County Health Department and Community Paramedics. Such measures include masks available for all guests, staff, and volunteers, CDC recommended bed placement, ample hygiene supplies, handwashing, respiratory etiquette, sanitation of surfaces, daily health checks by public health nurses or community paramedics, in addition to testing and isolation protocols. These practices are continuing at Base Camp and may change as new information and guidance from local and national health jurisdictions is provided.

## Why did you choose this location?

After reviewing all the options, the City of Bellingham, Whatcom County, and LMM concluded that the public market building was the option that met the relocation timeline and was also a financially responsible choice for relocating the Drop-In Center to Base Camp. This new site is also better suited to meet our community's needs for shelter than the former Old Town location for several reasons. The public market building was available immediately, has enough space for social distancing, adequate

restroom facilities for the expected number of guests, and is within walking distance to public transportation and other necessary services. Another advantage to this facility is the large parking lot area, a portion of which is used as a private courtyard for Base Camp guests. The building is also within the Central Business District, which has a prohibition against sitting or lying on public sidewalks (BMC.10.24.070). That means that if appropriate, the police may be able to ask people who congregate and engage in illegal activities at or near the shelter but not seeking services to move along. Additionally, the site itself and its configuration allows LMM to help manage persons who congregate on the property but are not seeking services.

### How is this project being paid for?

Using federal funding and housing levy funds, the City of Bellingham and Whatcom County are sharing the cost to relocate the Drop-In Center to Base Camp. The Lighthouse Mission Ministries will continue to cover its operational costs. The City of Bellingham is spending \$500,000 of the \$2.7 million it is receiving from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act toward this effort. This federal funding specifically identifies, “Expenses for care for homeless populations provided to mitigate COVID-19 effects and enable compliance with COVID-19 public health precautions” as an approved use for this emergency funding (Department of Commerce). An additional \$200,000 from the City of Bellingham is being spent from the Housing Levy as part of the Community Development Division’s 2020 Action Plan. An interlocal cost-sharing agreement was approved by the Whatcom County Council on June 2, 2020, and the Bellingham City Council on June 8, 2020. The County is providing the remaining relocation support of \$800,000 using federal funds that are specifically designed to support the homeless during this epidemic. The City and County are providing financial assistance for lease payments, making necessary renovations to convert the site into a 24-hour shelter, and purchase some furnishings such as outdoor seating. LMM will continue to rely on private donations to cover Base Camp’s operating costs which are estimated at \$500,000 per year.

### How long will Base Camp be located here?

The public market building is available for a period of up to 4 years; that will give LMM enough time to construct a new, permanent location in Old Town. The City of Bellingham, in partnership with Whatcom County and LMM, has negotiated an agreement in principle with the property owner for a 3-year lease with an option to extend for one additional year. The one-year extension will only be exercised if LMM needs additional time for completion of a permanent facility. A lease agreement was signed on June 17, 2020 by the City and a sublease agreement was executed between the City and LMM on June 22, 2020.

### Is a former grocery store really suitable for sheltering people?

There are a number of site improvements that have been made in and around the building to make it more welcoming and comfortable for guests, and also to minimize the impact on the surrounding neighborhood. Privacy fencing and plantings were installed around the parking lot to create a courtyard where guests can get some fresh air while remaining on the premises. There is also a space for guests to check in and out, so staff will know who is on-site at all times. A number of other site modifications were made to ensure that the building is suitable for this use, such as proper heating, cooling, ventilation and plumbing.

## How will Base Camp affect the businesses and homes in the area?

The City acknowledges that unwelcome behaviors have occurred in the vicinity of the Drop-in Center at its previous locations; Bellingham Police Department (BPD) and LMM staff are implementing plans and policies to deter illegal conduct around the public market building site. At the Drop-in Center's former location in Old Town, shelter guests and non-guests regularly congregated along and set up encampments in the public right-of-way. LMM staff do not have the authority or ability to police individuals on public property, but at the new location, a large courtyard that is set back from the property line allows staff to better accommodate individuals who tend to congregate at or near the shelter. LMM staff also frequently walk the perimeter and can address and/or bar individuals who are engaging in problematic behaviors. Large windows, a wide-open courtyard, and extensive security cameras make it much easier to monitor the site and surrounding area. The fact that the public market building is within the Central Business District also means that, if appropriate, BPD may ask people who are loitering or engaging in illegal activities outside the shelter during the day to move along. Additional strategies are underway to further deter camping in tents and/or vehicles in the permit parking lots and street rights-of-way adjacent to the Site.

Additionally, LMM and Base Camp will be required to adhere to all safety and security conditions within the City's temporary shelter code (BMC 20.15.030). Through the review process, the City and LMM also developed appropriate strategies and conditions to address concerns raised during the 14-day public comment period. In doing so, it is our hope that the community will not only remain safe, but also become a safer place than it was previously. Without this new shelter location, downtown residents and businesses would be negatively impacted by many additional people who are unsheltered and without access to food or hygiene facilities. A complete set of conditions and responses to concerns are contained in the Permit Decision, which is available for viewing at [cob.org/notices](http://cob.org/notices).

## What about public safety?

Public safety is a top priority. The BPD has worked closely with LMM to design Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design recommendations (lighting, visibility, design, etc.) to create a safer, more secure site for all. Security cameras inside and outside of the facility will continuously monitor the area. Having more personal space also reduces stress, and this results in fewer conflicts. When the Drop-in Center was housed at Bellingham High School, there were fewer conflicts among guests, and this trend has continued at Base Camp.

To further encourage safe behaviors, guests are required to adhere to a Code of Conduct, and LMM staff have worked with the BPD in order to create a responsive crisis referral process for instances where it is appropriate (conflict resolution, theft, trespassing, unruly behaviors, and mental health crisis, etc.). A confidential database is established at LMM for alerting all staff of any potential safety issues, including a log of daily events, guest registrations, case notes, treatment plans, and restricted persons information. Communication with other community partners and case workers are also included in this database when pertinent to the health, safety, and the well-being of the community. This information is used to support guest's progress toward their goals and create a safe and stable environment in LMM programs. Additionally, BPD has provided guides to neighbors regarding Central Business District Laws and related enforcement considerations.

## How could Base Camp move into the public market building before receiving their temporary building encampment permit, or even providing public notice?

Washington State, Whatcom County, and the City of Bellingham have all established Health Emergencies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, measures to ensure that community members are safe can be implemented immediately. In the case of the public market building, the Mayor approved the action (consistent with the requirements of Executive Order 2020-02 and Emergency Ordinance 2020-03-008) after determining that the usual approval process would cause undue delay and put guests at the Drop-in Center at significant risk. Under the current Executive Order and Emergency Ordinance, Base Camp may remain in the public market building for the duration of the declared emergency.

## Why did the Lighthouse Mission apply for and receive a permit if Base Camp is already located in the public market building?

In order to remain at the new location beyond the public health emergency (for a period of up to 4 years), the LMM needed to obtain a permit under the City's temporary shelter code (BMC 20.15.030). Since it is uncertain how long the declaration will last and it will likely be many months before a vaccine for COVID-19 is available and widely distributed, a temporary building encampment permit allows LMM to serve our community for the duration of the public health crisis (or until it's no longer necessary to maintain physical distance), and until they can secure an appropriate permanent location.

Under State law (RCW 35A.21.360), Religious Organizations are permitted to establish temporary encampments in existing buildings. This statute specifies that any conditions imposed by a city must be necessary to protect public health and safety and must not substantially burden the decisions or actions of a religious organization regarding the location of housing or shelter for homeless persons on property owned or controlled by the religious organization. The City uses the temporary shelter code (BMC 20.15.030) for reviewing such applications. The process includes extensive public input with an option to appeal, just like any other temporary encampment permit application. This process was used to evaluate the LMM's proposal and develop appropriate conditions to protect public health and safety as long as Base Camp is located at this site.

LMM received a temporary building encampment permit on August 7, 2020. The Permit Decision (USE2020-0029), SEPA Threshold Determination (SEP2020-0017) and all associated Exhibits with additional information can be viewed online at [cob.org/notices](http://cob.org/notices).

## Why weren't the public agencies involved "more transparent" about this project?

The City operated with a sense of great urgency in this emergency shelter site selection and negotiation process, due to the current health crisis and the need to vacate Bellingham Public High School by mid-July. These circumstances required site selection, negotiation, and steps toward implementation to occur simultaneously. The City Council voted to approve the terms of the lease for the former Public Market building after hearing public comment at a special meeting on Tuesday, June 16, 2020.

Public agencies generally do not negotiate land transactions in public; it is not required by state law and is not a best practice. The law recognizes site selection and negotiation are administrative functions and highlights a duty to keep those steps confidential. The City Council has authority over City finances and properties, however, and reviews and votes on such transactions with attendant public comment and

input. In addition to the lack of a legal requirement to make negotiations for property transactions public, it is not a best practice or in the public interest because the price may be affected if other potentially interested parties are aware of terms being discussed. If the price increases, that cost is borne by the public.

The need for more adequate shelter space has been a community-wide discussion for many years prior to COVID-19. Whatcom Unified Command identified providing a temporary shelter as a priority for COVID-19 emergency response, as has been noted in public meetings and announcements. The move to Bellingham High School was always identified as temporary with identification of another alternative site necessary for the duration of the emergency. An interlocal agreement to share costs for an alternate site was published in advance and approved at public meetings of the Whatcom County Council on June 2, 2020 and the Bellingham City Council on June 8, 2020.

### Why is the City working with LMM instead of a secular non-profit?

Local government agencies typically rely on non-profit social service organizations to carry out the direct work of providing shelter because these organizations have the expertise necessary to do so. The City partners with and funds over a dozen local housing and human services non-profits, including the Opportunity Council, Lydia Place, Northwest Youth Services, Sun Community Services, Catholic Community Services, YWCA, Interfaith Coalition, Mercy Housing Northwest and Sean Humphrey House. All of these providers have unique missions and offer different types of services to address and prevent homelessness in our community. Currently, Base Camp is the only shelter in Bellingham that accepts adults on a daily basis without a referral. The City would likely support any qualified agency that stepped forward to run a secular emergency drop-in shelter, but so far, only the LMM has offered to provide this service. LMM offers its services without discrimination. Though religious activities are available, they are voluntary, and LMM does not require participation to access food or shelter at Base Camp. The City of Bellingham and Whatcom County are grateful that LMM is able to offer shelter to so many who are in need. For more information about other efforts to address and prevent homelessness, visit [www.cob.org/stateofhousing](http://www.cob.org/stateofhousing).

### What facilities are available for guests at Base Camp?

At Base Camp, along with meals and a bed, guests also have access to restrooms, laundry facilities, showers, basic storage for overnight guests, important document and medication storage, a café, mail services, a SeaMar community health center, space for telehealth meetings, case management with LMM and strategic partners, meeting space, emotional and spiritual support, and a rich community while navigating next steps. Newly renovated private showers allow LMM to offer guests increased access to hygiene opportunities. To learn more about regular services at Base Camp, please visit <https://www.thelighthousemission.org/what-we-do/base-camp/>.