

**UNTIL  
JUSTICE  
JUST IS**



**eliminating racism  
empowering women  
ywca  
Greater Cleveland**

**Homelessness Call for Justice: Beyond the Norm YWCA of Cleveland**

Margaret Mitchell, YWCA Greater Cleveland, President & CEO

Cleveland – September 14, 2020 – Our call for JUSTICE comes at a time of unparalleled community disruption, with the COVID-19 pandemic continuing to challenge Clevelanders who rely on our respective organizations for a multitude of services. As we all now know, initial government projections had us beyond the worst of the pandemic by now – with communities opening and returning to normal. No one expected us to be at this place in time, with the “new normal” of COVID-19 still ravaging communities with no clear end in sight and a deepening chasm in the socio-economic divide that existed pre-COVID. This “new normal” is taking us all into uncharted territory.

Simultaneous with this “new normal” came the confluence of local and national protests across the nation and the globe. These protests, experts say, have pushed racial inequity and racism to the forefront of community dialogues in significant and meaningful ways. These factors combined have also led cities such as Cleveland, Akron, and Columbus, as well as Cuyahoga and Hamilton Counties, to at long last take issues seriously – resulting in the unprecedented declaration of racism as a public health crisis. This is a position YWCA Greater Cleveland began advocating for in 2019. In November 2019, we publicly announced our call to action to declare racism a public health crisis at the 400 Years of Inequities Summit, which commemorated the 1619 commercial start of chattel slavery.

As the operator and provider of client services at the Norma Herr Women’s Center (NHWC), we serve a disproportionate number of Black women. As such, we know intimately the factors of systematic structural and institutional racism. We have remained open and serving clients since day one of the pandemic and were able to make COVID-19 related changes to our congregate shelter environment based on the recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

But that is not cause to celebrate, as COVID -19 uncertainty remains. As a result, we have consistently been over the allowable census, based not on a feeling but Federal, state, and local recommendations aligning with congregate settings.

Taking the square footage, staffing, sleeping and dining into consideration - the number of individual women in the shelter at Norma Herr that can be housed safely: **84**

Here’s the reality:

2020	March	April	May	June	July	August
Average Monthly Census(NHWC)	170	102	101	94	93	103

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Off Site Shelter - Hotel census by month

2020	March	April	May	June	July	August
Average Monthly Census(Hotel)	56	60	67	80	70	70

YWCA Greater Cleveland will NOT keep doing what we are doing.

Our system of homeless care is already strained, and our current funding will not sustain non-congregate solutions of temporary housing. In our current configuration at NHWC, it has become virtually impossible to continue to maintain the CDC's recommended congregate shelter guidelines.

If current CDC pandemic projections hold firm, our non-congregate capacity could be depleted, thus leaving us with no capacity whatsoever to serve clients – who are still disproportional Black.

Our community reality regarding homelessness was challenged before COVID-19, with resources on the decline and demand exceeding capacity. As we look forward at a landscape that may soon see the number of evictions increasing, we can already conservatively project the need for emergency housing funding to divert people from congregate shelter environments and more rapidly exit individuals from homelessness. Bottom-line: Our shelters must move away from the congregate care model, a move that will require us to boldly re-envision how we provide this care. In response to the need for a comprehensive approach to care, the NAEH has developed a framework that provides guidance for communities on how to strategically leverage their emergency shelter funding across a range of key public health and economic recovery strategies.

Armed with the public declaration of racism as a public health crisis- we, one of the few Black-led organizations at the homelessness continuum table – we, who are often overlooked and regularly marginalized, urge you not to separate the process of dismantling structural racism and disparities from concrete reforms of how we provide shelter to predominately Black and Brown communities. As always, we stand ready to work together to advocate for changes in the areas of livable wage income, rent protections and policies, with increased affordable housing, accessible behavioral health for the marginalized homeless Black and Brown communities, and a new vision for supporting women who are experiencing a temporary crisis of housing that holistically supports safety and dignity.

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Recommendation:

1. Call for an immediate convening of a community coalition or at minimum, the establishment of a working group that can quickly begin to look at drafting a “whole community approach” to the issues at hand.
2. Align with that of the Cuyahoga County and City of Cleveland to dismantle racism through a public health lens.
3. Collectively develop an actionable, whole community plan that takes firm aim at reducing disparities and inequality across our communities.

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### **About YWCA Greater Cleveland**

YWCA is dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women and promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all. YWCA Greater Cleveland was established in 1868. It is the seventh oldest YWCA in the country and one of the oldest continuously operating nonprofits in Cleveland. For 150 years, YWCA has fought to bring shelter and structure to the vulnerable, to build greater racial equity and to provide a space where women’s leadership is valued and promoted.

**YWCA IS ON A MISSION**