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## Starkville Strong – #BetterTogether

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An Open Letter Regarding the Lack of Warming Shelter in Starkville:

In the interest of both transparency and accountability, we would like the community to know about our efforts in trying to work with city and county officials to find temporary, warm shelter for our neighbors who are homeless and/or may have a home but whose utilities may be currently turned off.

When the weather forecast predicted that nighttime temperatures would drop below freezing this weekend, we began contacting city and county officials, as well as other local contacts, to request the use of a facility for a warming center. When a member of the community asked Mayor Spruill for assistance in locating a place for homeless people to get out of the cold, she informed them that the storm shelter belonged to Oktibbeha County.



With no other alternatives offered by the city, Starkville Strong leadership then sought permission from Oktibbeha County Supervisor Orlando Trainer to use the storm shelter as a warming station. We were told to contact Kristen Campanella, the Director of Oktibbeha County's Emergency Management Agency, for assistance. Director Campanella was extremely helpful in establishing a similar warming station facility during the February 2021 ice storm. When Director Campanella responded late Wednesday afternoon, she reiterated that the storm shelter is not equipped for sleeping or showering, and that no one had used the warming center facility in 2021. While we understand that the storm shelter lacks showers, we're not sure why people wouldn't be able to sleep there. If the county would open the building, Starkville Strong would be happy to assist in arranging bedding, food, and volunteers.

On Tuesday evening, the Columbus City Council voted unanimously to open a warming center at Probst Park every night until the extreme temperatures pass. (More information about the Council's vote can be found here: <https://cdispatch.com/news/2022-01-05/city-opens-warming-center-at-probst-park/>)

Starkville Strong was able to contact leaders of The Mission in West Point and work out an agreement to house people from Starkville overnight. Both the Columbus and West Point facilities will be open from 5 p.m. to 9 a.m. the following morning.

As we were unsuccessful in finding a more local solution, Starkville Strong is now working on arranging transportation to and from the facilities in either Columbus or West Point. At this time, we are aware of 9 people who are most vulnerable to the severe temperatures. However, we also know that there are many more people who will need a place to stay warm.

With this in mind, we would like to take this opportunity to invite our city and county officials to adopt a more proactive stance on this issue. We hereby ask that both the City of Starkville and Oktibbeha County institute a policy to establish one or more communal warming centers that would automatically be made available to the community whenever nighttime temperatures are predicted to drop below 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Starkville Strong would be willing and able to arrange for bedding, food services, and volunteers if needed.

On a final note, we'd like to make the community aware that Starkville Strong has placed bins around Starkville to serve as "free little winter weather clothes pantries." We invite anyone who is able to consider donating gently used or new items to these bins.

Items most useful are: blankets, scarves, gloves/mittens, toboggans/winter hats, Hot Hands, and sleeping bags.

Bins are located at:

- Dunkington (out front at 109 S Lafayette)
- SOSD Discovery Center (1504 Louisville; either by the free little food pantry there or by the left side door)
- Starkville Public Library (out back)
- Connection (101 W Lampkin, diagonally across from the Starkville Police Department)

Thank you for your continued support of Starkville Strong's mission. We truly are #BetterTogether.

Sincerely,

Starkville Strong Team