

Spaces to rest lost to Covid...New York's worsening problem of "a place for the homeless"

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In New York, where a year has passed since the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, the social issue of "a place for the homeless" faces renewed urgency. As stores and public transit have closed temporarily or shut down for good, spaces for homeless people to spend their time have dwindled. The city has begun to offer shelter in the form of empty hotel rooms, but this has been met with ire from local residents.

Forced into the street by the subway's nighttime closures

A sidewalk in the center of New York City, where few people walk past. Around noon one day last month, Terry Holt, 35, sat with a paper cup in front of him that he was using to collect donations. "I used to be able to sleep in the subway," he says. "But now I have to stay outside. It's freezing."

Mr. Holt became homeless two years ago, and did not lose his job or home due to Covid. However, the suspension of night time service in the subway, where he could escape the cold for just \$2.75, has been painful. The details of his circumstances were unclear, but he repeated multiple times, "I want to go back to Hawaii where my family is."

Hygiene worsened as cafes and libraries closed

According to a survey by a non-profit organization, There are at least 55,000 homeless people in New York City. James Winans, 42, who runs homeless shelters in the city, explains that, largely thanks to the city's eviction moratorium, the number of homeless people has not necessarily increased, but that their personal hygiene has become visibly worse.

This is because, in addition to nighttime subway service, cafes and libraries, where homeless people used to be able to use bathrooms, have all closed, and places to shower and wash have effectively disappeared. Winans emphasizes that while "stay home" has been touted as a prevention measure for Covid-19, there are many people who cannot do that.

With risk of Covid, not let in by friends or avoiding shelters

Covid-19 has also affected homeless peoples' relationships. Doing odd jobs, one 19-year-old man, originally from the Congo, cannot make enough money to rent an apartment. He says that some of his friends stopped letting him stay with them because of the risk of contracting Covid. Now he goes between shelters.

"I am glad that the shelters are there, but the chance of getting Covid there makes me reluctant to go," Lee Damron, 47, who sometimes sits near where warm air wafts up from the entrance to

the subway, explained. When the factory in Wisconsin where Mr. Damron worked closed, he came to New York and became homeless. “Employers won’t hire someone who doesn’t have an address. I really want to move into an apartment and get a job but...”

Dissatisfaction with local government response

Local governments have undertaken measures such as converting empty hotel rooms, the number of which has increased due to Covid, into homeless shelters. However, some of the homeless people using these facilities are addicted to drugs or alcohol, or use the street as a toilet, prompting a growing number of local residents to demand that they be moved.

The facilities Mr. Winans runs have set up extra showers and created space for people to work from home, but he is deeply concerned about the future. He explains that the eviction moratorium will end in May and when that ends, the number of homeless people will likely increase, creating a far more serious problem.