

# Falmouth Residents Sleep Out To Raise Awareness About Homelessness

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Laura Cole (center), coordinator of care and connection at the First Congregational Church of Falmouth, serves a bowl of soup to Lewis Randa, executive director of the Peace Abbey Foundation in Millis, as Dena Quinn fills to-go cups following last week's Longest Night vigil. After the vigil and meal, some went outside to sleep in tents and cars to get a taste of what homelessness is like for one night.

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The sun set at 4:15 PM in Falmouth on December 21. Some Falmouth residents spent that night—the longest night of the year—in tents or cars in the parking lot of the First Congregational Church to honor the 49 Cape and Islands unhoused people who died in 2023.

The event began with a vigil at the church in recognition of National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day. The names of all 49 unhoused men and women who died in 2023 were read aloud. Poetry was read, prayers were said and music was played.

Afterward, some attendees spent the night outside the church, sleeping in tents or in their cars. The purpose of this demonstration is to raise awareness and increase empathy around homelessness.

The Falmouth-based nonprofit Belonging To Each Other (BTEO)—which provides services to local unhoused people, including shelter in the winter months—helps organize this annual event.

This demonstration is done every year, but this year was particularly cold, BTEO Executive Director Gina Torielli said. At night, the temperature dropped into the low 20s, with the wind chill in the teens. That night, BTEO provided emergency shelter for 34 unhoused people.

Meanwhile, BTEO board member Christina Brodie was participating in the sleep-out for the first time, having attended the annual service in previous years. She slept in the back of her car that night, huddled between blankets, pillows and winter gear she brought from home.

Ms. Brodie has been involved with BTEO for three years, she said.

“Those of us involved should have a little more personal, direct sense of the people we serve,” she said, which is why she decided to do the sleep-out.

Ms. Brodie spent the first couple of hours talking with another participant. Around midnight, she decided to try to get to sleep.

“Sleeping in a car is not comfortable,” Ms. Brodie said. “It was enlightening.”

At home, Ms. Brodie usually uses her iPad before she goes to sleep. But that night was so cold the iPad was not working, and she had forgotten to bring a book to read. Without anything to distract her, her mind focused on the cold.

“It can be really long hours for people who don't have any entertainment or anything,” Ms. Brodie said. “You just notice the cold, and I noticed the discomfort a lot.”

After hours of fitful sleep, Ms. Brodie considered going home. But for the sake of better understanding what a night on the streets was truly like, she stuck it out until around 6 AM.

Ms. Brodie was acutely aware of her privilege that night—she had a decent car, access to a bathroom inside the church, money for gas she could use to warm up the car, and most importantly, a bed to go home to, she said.

Ms. Brodie has always felt grateful for what she had because she grew up with her parents volunteering their time to help unhoused and less fortunate people, she said. But having had this experience will help her in her work with BTEO, Ms. Brodie said, and, in particular, her grant writing.

Ms. Brodie moved to Falmouth full-time in 2015. Like many others, Ms. Brodie had no idea when she moved here that a place as well-off as Falmouth could have such a substantial homeless population. But as she became more involved in the Falmouth community over the years, she learned more about the local unhoused population.

“There’s a lot of places to get lost and be out of sight,” Ms. Brodie said.

Laura Cole, a member of the First Congregational Church and a member of the organizing committee for this event, also participated in the sleep-out.

Ms. Cole tried to tire herself out in the church kitchen before heading to bed. Like Ms. Brodie, Ms. Cole could not help but think about her privilege that night. She wrote about her experience on her phone as she tried to lie in her car later, and sent those written observations to the Enterprise.

“How can this experience possibly compare to what my homeless brothers and sisters actually live?” she wrote. “I have a car and I have a long down jacket, hat, mittens and a sleeping bag rated for below 32 degrees.”

Ms. Cole settled in for the night around 9:30 PM. To try to make the experience more true to life, she left her car off all night. Right away, she noticed the cold in her hands, feet and nose.

“I close my eyes and realize I am not tired enough, so I just begin to meditate and relax my body and visualize heat,” she wrote. “But it doesn’t keep me tranquil very long.”

To try to stop the shivering, Ms. Cole wrapped herself in her sleeping bag. She pulled the hood of her jacket over her eyes to try to block out light to make it easier to sleep, but it did not stop the sounds of church bells and nearby cars.

“However, I am lucky because the church parking lot is a safe space,” Ms. Cole wrote. “I am not afraid of others harming me while I try to sleep.”

After writing for a while, Ms. Cole got up to use the bathroom. At this point, she realized it was 3 AM and she had been awake the entire time. It was 23 degrees.

After using the bathroom and warming up in the church, Ms. Cole returned to her car. She was so tired by then that she managed to fall asleep for a bit.

Ms. Cole woke a couple of hours later to the sounds of cars starting and driving off. It was 5:15 AM. She got up to start making coffee and breakfast for the people who had stayed overnight.

“I am physically exhausted and know that I am working today,” she wrote. “How do my brothers and sisters do this over and over?”

BTEO’s ultimate goal is to end homelessness in Falmouth, according to its website. The organization relies on donations to cover housing costs for unhoused people, wages for the licensed social worker on staff, and the costs of food and other supplies for unhoused people, the website says.