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Shelter Begins Using Breathalyzer

No one is turned away during the first day of sobriety testing

By [Chuck Potter](#) , [Kevin Dale](#) Published on 9/16/2008



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Michael Hervieux takes a breath test while checking into the shelter at St. James Episcopal Church in New London Monday. He was allowed to stay. Anyone whose blood-alcohol content measured above .08 would have been be turned away.

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New London - The New London Homeless Hospitality Center Monday began using a BACTRACK Breathalyzer to test the blood alcohol content of anyone seeking quarters in the 50-bed overnight shelter it operates at St. James Episcopal Church.

The new procedure complies with a City Council order issued Aug. 4 that shelter operators accept only people who have a BAC below .08 percent, Connecticut's legal limit for drunken driving. Anyone at or above that threshold when the shelter closes its doors at 9:30 p.m. would be turned away.

On Monday, no one among the first wave of arrivals, some 30 men and women, was turned away.

Catherine Zall, executive director of the hospitality center, said the center began

preparing people last week. People were told what was going to happen, why it was happening and how the center would make it happen, she said, in addition to conducting some dry runs.

Say Phontsavad, 38, one of the clients, said last week's trial run was a success.

"I didn't see anyone get kicked out," he said. "Nobody was so drunk they couldn't stay. I saw honest people. Some people said they had one, two, three drinks. They just sit outside for a couple hours, get sober and try again."

Even though the council's policy requires everyone to be tested, Zall said "probably not more than three" people who seek a shelter bed are intoxicated on an average night.

"There were always only a few," she said. "It's not always the same people, and I suspect some won't show up."

That suited some people just fine. One client, who would only give his first name, Tom, said the breathalyzer was a comfort to him.

"I appreciate it. I have my wife with me, in the other room," he said. "I feel a lot more comfortable knowing people aren't coming in here over the limit."

Eric, another client, said he doesn't drink, and zero percent BAC he registered on the BACTRACK supported his words.

"I don't like alcohol," he said. "But I think it's good that they do this. It will keep the arguing down. It think it will be more peaceful for everybody. It'll be a safer environment."

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It was a steadily-moving line as clients had their carry-in packages searched for dangerous weapons, and, Zall said, stray bottles.

"We're doing the best we can," she said. "People are resilient and good humored."

Indeed, laughter abounded as the process moved along Monday, as they lined up for the test with the BACTRACK, a four-inch long, 1.5-inch wide device that, according to its Web site, can be purchased for about \$80.00.

Clients and the volunteer staff shared jokes and one-liners as a volunteer instructed several clients in the proper procedure for blowing into the device.

"I used up all my breath," a young woman said, to a chorus of laughter from those who would be next. "Let me start again."

Father Michael Belt, pastor at St. James, said the process was smooth on a warm evening, but he speculated that might go away with the summer temperatures.

"It's not 30 degrees out," he said. "How fast will it go when it's cold and raining, or snowing?"

Zall, meanwhile, harbors concern for those who might be turned away, or won't show up because they are unable to meet the sobriety threshold.

She said shelter staff doesn't know where to direct them.

"There really aren't many options," said Zall, who added that the police station and Union Station - past places the city's homeless slept - may not be alternatives. "I guess people will just be outside, whatever."

The councilors who supported the "dry" policy had argued that the policy of providing beds to intoxicated persons encouraged habitual drinking among the city's homeless.

The shelter had previously allowed intoxicated persons to spend the night but would exclude people if their behavior was unsafe or disruptive.

Shelter officials at first resisted the council's dry-shelter mandate. They claimed the policy may be discriminatory and was in conflict with the center's mission to make contact with homeless persons suffering from substance abuse.

But Zall said center officials eventually decided to comply with the breath-test policy, and enact it in a manner that is "dignified and considerate" to shelter guests.

"My hope is they can see the intent of what we're doing," Zall said, "and it won't negatively impact the relationships that we're trying to build with people." ■

New London