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City's No-Freeze Shelter 'A Blessing' To Men Facing Life On Street

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The men standing outside Hartford's no-freeze homeless shelter were braced for the bone-chilling cold Tuesday night, hoodies pulled tight around their heads, long, heavy coats shielding them from the wind.

The doors weren't scheduled to open officially for the night for another two hours, but the man inside said he'd let them in as soon as another employee showed up. It was too cold to have the men wait much longer.

One man, who gave his name as Anthony, said he makes the walk from the North End to the Lafayette Street shelter every night — making sure to get there early enough to secure one of the coveted beds inside.

"It's a good place," Anthony said. "Comfortable, warm."

"It's a blessing," the man standing next to him quickly added. That man said he discovered the shelter after being released from prison three weeks ago. He walked out of the courthouse with nowhere to go, he said, and miraculously spotted the shelter sign.

"I don't know where I would have gone if this wasn't here, he said.

Actually, both men do know because both have spent many freezing nights outside.

On benches, under bridges.

Anthony, leaning against doors of neighborhood apartment buildings, hoping the heat escaping from inside would keep him warm. Another time, better than most, he admitted, in a car with eight blankets and still, he wondered if he'd make it through the night.

The men had heard all about the debate over the location of the shelter, first slated for a downtown church, then moved into the old, state-owned Second Church of Christ building when downtown residents complained.

They say they've heard complaints from residents of the apartment building next door, too.

No one wants this in their neighborhood, Anthony said. And, he said he can't really blame them. He has five kids of his own, and he'd probably worry about their safety as well if they lived in the neighborhood.

But, he said, looking over at the lights flicking on from residents likely just getting home from work, people should remember that the men they wish they didn't have to see, that they wish weren't burdening their neighborhood, could very well be their brother, their friend.

They should remember too, Anthony said, how little it takes to suddenly be in their shoes.