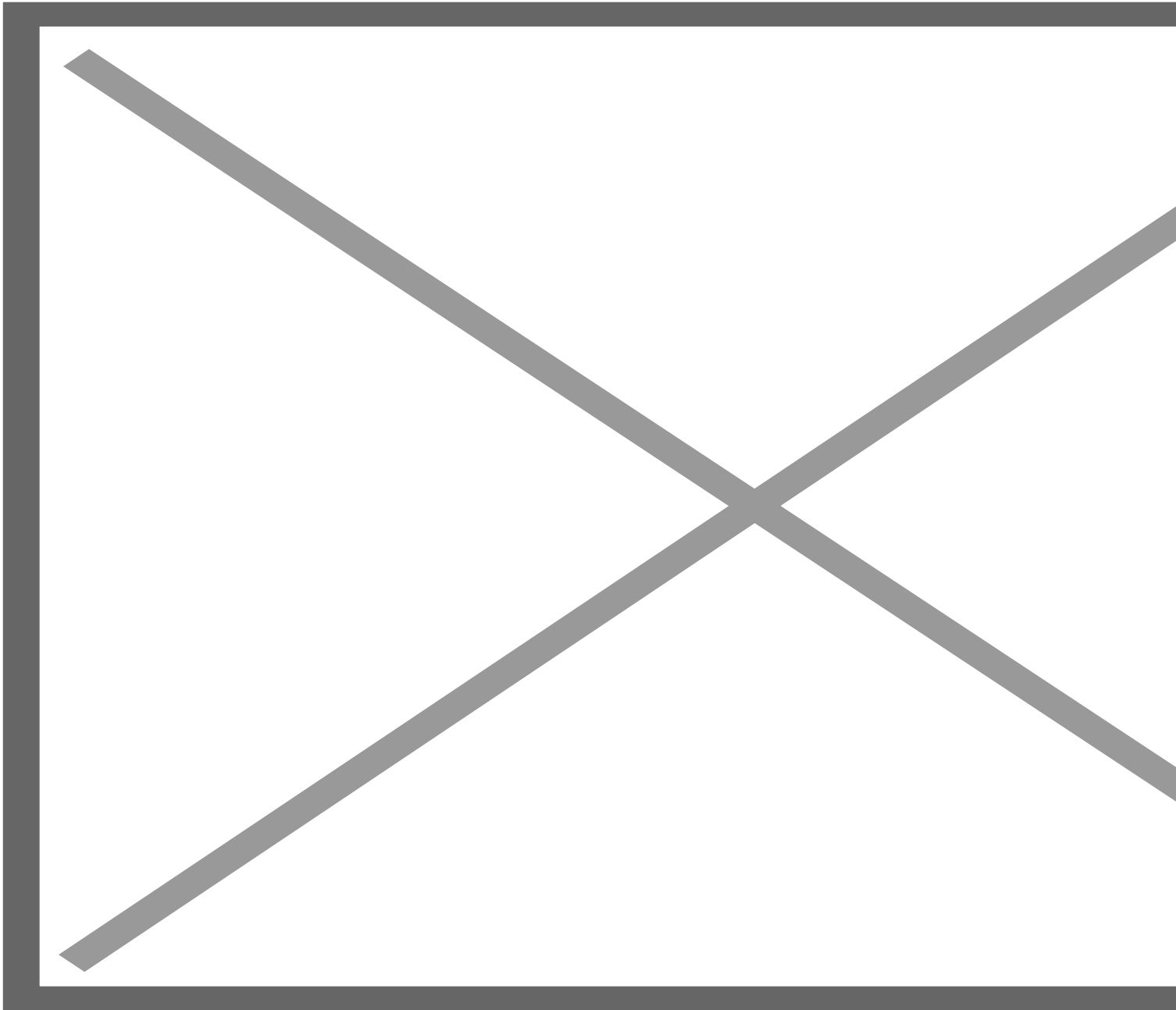


Maryland church becomes shelter to keep unhoused people out of jail

by [Shireen Korkzan](#)

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St. Paul's By-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Ocean City, Maryland, opened its doors on March 31 as an overnight shelter for unhoused people. (Photo courtesy of Jill Williams)

An Episcopal parish in Ocean City, Maryland, is facing a potential new legal clash with city officials after it began allowing unhoused people to sleep inside the church last week.

[St. Paul's by-the-Sea Episcopal Church](#), which is part of the [Diocese of Easton](#), faced an April 1 deadline to stop allowing unhoused people to sleep in church-provided tents on its property, or face fines up to \$5,000 daily.

The small encampment was set up last fall [in response](#) to Ocean City and the surrounding Worcester County adopting ordinances in May 2025, making it illegal—punishable by jail time—for people to sleep in public spaces. In February, City Manager Terence McGean told Williams that the tents needed to be gone by March 23. The [deadline](#) was pushed to April 1, the first day a fine would have been issued.

After raising money to hire staff and cover other expenses needed to operate as a shelter, St. Paul's By-the-Sea opened its doors on March 31, beating the city's deadline. The new ministry, "The Shelter by the Sea," will operate nightly and year-round from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. Eastern.

Additionally, the church will help overnight guests access other resources, such as substance abuse programs and affordable housing assistance. The shelter, which is mostly funded by the congregation for now, initially housed 12 people. As of April 7, one week after opening, 21 people are expected to sleep there.

Jill Williams, rector of St. Paul's by-the-Sea, said in an interview that guests have said they are grateful for the opportunity to get a good night's sleep.

"Every night at 7 o'clock, people are excitedly lined up outside and ready to enter the church for the night," she said.

Williams said the number of nightly guests is expected to continue growing, which is why the church is working on expanding its community partnerships to help sustain the ministry indefinitely.

Ocean City is a resort town located on a barrier island off the Atlantic coast.

"During the off-season, a few hotels offer cheap weekly rentals. But the tourism season starts on April 1, so those rooms have been converted back to full-priced hotel rooms. That's where a lot of new people have been coming in from," Williams said. "We're also getting calls from homeless outreach teams in neighboring cities asking us to give people a place to stay."

McGean [told](#) the *Baltimore Sun* that St. Paul's by-the-Sea didn't notify Ocean City officials of its indoor shelter plan. He said any such plan must follow local law and that the city would review any indoor shelter for compliance. Williams, when asked, said she doesn't believe permits are required because the church isn't making structural changes, and is protected by the federal [Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act](#).

St. Paul's by-the-Sea has retained a lawyer.

Even though St. Paul's congregation was "exhausted" from opening the shelter in the middle of Holy Week, Williams said that, theologically, the timing was "very fitting."

"We lived Holy Week on a whole different level this year. It was such a sign of the reality that Good Friday is not the end of the story, that there is hope out there, and there is love and transformation. That's what Jesus does in the world over and over again," Williams said.

"When Christ knocks and says, 'I need a place to sleep,' we must listen. Every single person who walks through our doors to eat and to sleep is Christ." —Episcopal News Service