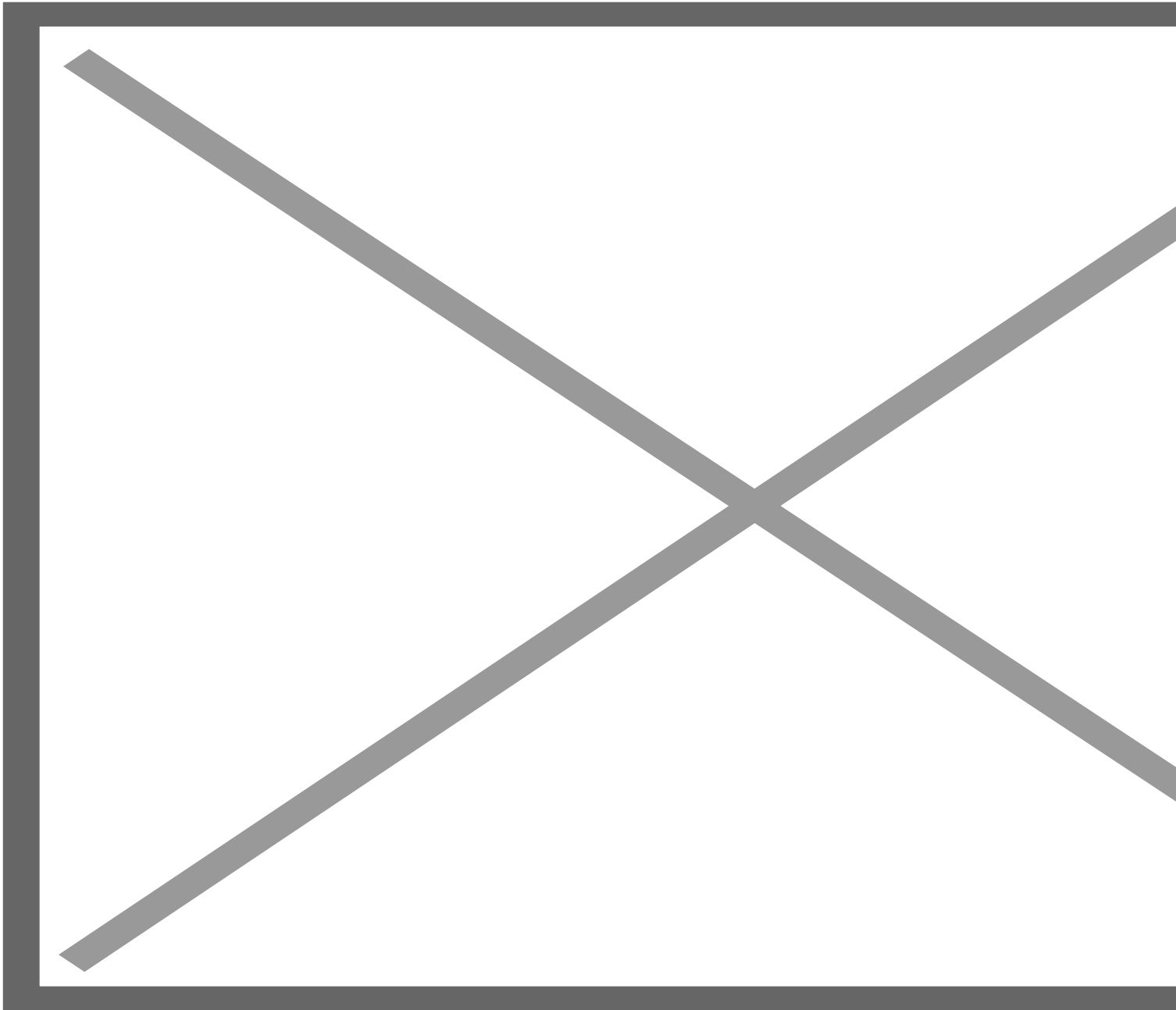


Maryland church won't close shelter after city threatens 'enforcement action'

by [Shireen Korkzan](#)

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Bunk beds at the shelter for unhoused people inside St. Paul's By-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Ocean City, Maryland (Photo courtesy of Jill Williams)

Nearly six weeks after [St. Paul's by-the-Sea Episcopal Church](#) in downtown Ocean City, Maryland, opened its overnight shelter for unhoused people inside its building, city officials charged the parish with a zoning violation. The city is now [demanding](#) the church close the shelter by June 8 at 9 a.m. or be fined an unspecified amount daily until operations cease and face “further enforcement action.”

Jill Williams, rector of St. Paul's by-the-Sea, which is part of the Diocese of Easton, said in an interview that the church refuses to close the shelter or pay any fines.

“We’ve done everything to be in compliance with the fire marshal and with the Americans with Disabilities Act,” Williams said. “What this latest threat means is [Ocean City Mayor Richard W. Meehan] and city council hate that we exist. They’re angry that we set up this shelter because they don’t want homeless people across the street from their offices and so close to the tourist area.”

Ocean City is a resort town located on a barrier island off the Atlantic coast. Its [peak tourism season](#) runs from Memorial Day in late May through Labor Day in early September.

In Ocean City's May 8 notice to St. Paul's by-the-Sea, the city's director of planning and community development, George M. Bendler, said the shelter's bunk beds are “consistent with barracks-style living quarters,” which are not permitted within its zoning district. Williams said the bunk beds purchased for the sleeping space are specifically made for overnight shelters.

“It’s all been verified,” she said.

Last month, the city's fire marshal inspected the shelter and, according to Williams, initially reported that no violations were made. Neither Meehan nor city council members have visited the church or the shelter.

St. Paul's by-the-Sea's legal clashes with city officials [started](#) last fall when the church began allowing unhoused people to sleep in church-provided tents on its property. The small encampment was made 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. Earlier this year, the church faced a deadline to remove the tents by April 1, or face fines of up to \$5,000 per day.

After raising money to hire staff and cover other expenses required to operate as a shelter, St. Paul's by-the-Sea beat the city's deadline when it opened “The Shelter by-the-Sea” on March 31. The new ministry operates nightly from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. Now, about 30 people sleep at the shelter every night.

The ministry, which is mostly funded by donations and the congregation, additionally offers dinner and breakfast, and helps overnight guests access other resources, such as substance abuse programs and affordable housing assistance.

Ocean City Police officers and [Worcester County Health Department](#) officials have brought several people to sleep at the shelter.

“Even government agencies in the city and county are recognizing that we’re filling a need, and we’re doing it properly because they otherwise wouldn’t feel comfortable enough to trust us to serve these people,” Williams said. “These agencies have been very supportive of us and very helpful in the last six weeks, so I really don’t understand why the mayor and city council still have an issue.”

St. Paul's by-the-Sea's lawyer, Robin R. Cockey, replied to the city's letter on the church's behalf on May 12, explaining why the parish won't close the shelter or pay any fines:

“The church has absolutely no intention of turning these folks out,” Cockey said in his letter. “Providing shelter for the homeless is a fundamental tenet of the social gospel espoused by The Episcopal Church of America, of which St. Paul’s is a parish. The church will not comply with Mr. Bendler’s ultimatum, nor will it pay a nickel of any fine he imposes.”

Cockey also noted in his letter that St. Paul’s by-the-Sea is federally protected under the US Constitution’s free exercise clause and the [Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act](#). These protections “afford the church ample protection against overzealous zoning impositions such as those threatened by Mr. Bendler.”

If Ocean City fines St. Paul’s by-the-Sea and the church responds with a lawsuit, Williams said she’s “100 percent confident” the parish would win.

“We don’t move in fear, and I think that’s how they would like us to move,” Williams said. “We’re not asking any government for permission or for a partnership with the city to do our mission. That’s the law, so the work we’re doing is legal. . . . If we get to that point [of suing], we’re just going to keep doing the work and caring for the people who are most affected by this—our unhoused guests.”

Most shelter guests are aware of the city’s demand to close the shelter and have expressed concern with Williams and shelter staff, which Williams said is “the last thing they need to worry about.”

“Most of these people pass out right after eating dinner because they’re exhausted, and many of them now feel comfortable leaving their possessions at the church during the day. Some are even now using the church as their home base,” Williams said. “I think too many people forget that homeless people are human, and they know what city leaders are saying about them.”

Williams has invited nearby places of worship to visit the shelter on May 27 with the goal of expanding support and forming ecumenical and interfaith collaboration. So far, leaders from five churches plan to participate.

“The church must stick up for the homeless,” Williams said. “We’re not stopping, and we’re not backing down.”
—Episcopal News Service