

Winter Protocol

by Joe Class III

28.

That's the magic number.

Not 29. Not 30. 28 degrees Fahrenheit, sustained for a minimum of six hours, confirmed by the National Weather Service station in Romeoville. When that happens, our community center network activates Winter Protocol. Our four facilities in the southwest suburbs open at precisely 6 p.m., with cots and blankets at the ready. Volunteers sign in. I start the coffee. Janie drags in the folding tables from the back room, Barry helping her, and they line them up near the entrance. That way, each person coming in has somewhere to set down whatever they may be carrying.

Winter Protocol? It really does work. I want to say that first. Without it, people who would otherwise be outside in the cold are inside, safe, warm, and fed until 7 a.m. the following morning. Volunteers come from Lockport, Bolingbrook, Plainfield, and Romeoville, showing up on school nights and weekends, all without being asked twice. The network coordinator, Diane, has been running our location since 2019, keeping logistics moving with a quiet efficiency that only looks easy because she never stops working.

It's a good program.

But the magic number is still 28.

That means someone sleeps outside when it's 31.

At first, I thought that was cruel. But I've thought about it long enough to be sure of one thing. This is exactly what systems were designed to do. They draw lines because they have to. You can't run a volunteer operation on feelings alone. You need some kind of trigger. A policy. A number telling forty people whether they need to show up tonight or stay home with their families. 28 is a defensible line. It saves lives. I'm not here to argue against it.

Does the cold wait for the threshold? No, it doesn't.

I've been volunteering with Winter Protocol for three years. I started volunteering after Valentine's body was found in a parking garage off Route 30. Valentine came home from Iraq homeless and different, traumatized by what he saw, but he never talked about it. When the topic of his military service came up, he shut down, refusing to say one word. That alone kept steady employment nearly impossible. It was 34 degrees that night, not cold enough to open Winter Protocol. I read his story in the *Gazette*. I glossed over it because it didn't impact me, until my next-door neighbor told me she knew Valentine. That changed everything. I showed up when Winter Protocol opened again.

The system is good at solving the problem it was designed to solve, but blind to the one sitting right next to it.

Let me tell you about two people, neither of whom is real. They are composites built from dozens of nights, dozens of faces, so many conversations starting with bad coffee and ending somewhere I never imagined we'd be. If, for some reason, you recognize either of them, that's only because you, too, have been paying attention.

Ray is first.

I think he's in his late fifties but, man, he looks a lot older. Ray told me he's been living on the streets off and on for eleven years, since the factory in Joliet where he worked for over two decades closed without so much as a goodbye. The job he thought was permanent, with full retirement benefits, turned out not to be. Ray has a drinking problem that started way before the factory closed and got worse after. Anxiety turns his paperwork into a map written in a language he's never seen. When Ray tries to explain his situation to someone trying to help him, the story comes out sideways. It does when he shares it with me. Details in the wrong order. Dates that don't match. Not because he's lying, but because his nervous system has been running on emergency power for so long that putting things in order is a luxury he can't always afford.

Then there's Carla.

Carla speaks to me like a professional influencer. Smiling. She responds to nonverbal cues to answer questions I haven't asked yet. She learned the language of systems the way some people learn a second language. Out of necessity. With total fluency. She knows what to say and when. She's learned how the right key words open

doors. Carla knows how to present her situation, so it reads as urgent but not unstable, sympathetic but not demanding. She is warm and specific and grateful in exactly the right proportions. The networks often approve her requests. Quickly. And honestly? Everyone involved feels good about helping her.

Here's the problem.

The filter built to catch the Carlas catches the Rays every single time.

Ray's story is messier than Carla's. His paperwork is rarely complete. His references are next to impossible to reach. Ray looks exactly like the person the system screens out. On the other hand, Carla's looks exactly like the person the system is supposed to serve. Ray's story is inconsistent because his life really is that hard. And Carla? She performs coherence only because she figured out early on that nobody wanted to stay long enough to hear the real version.

The system is pointed at the wrong thing. It was built to manage flow, which it does consistently and beautifully. But nobody inside the system is paid to stay. Nobody is paid to sit with Carla long enough for the real version of her to surface. Nobody is paid to sit with Ray when his story stops adding up.

On a Wednesday night in January, a 28-degree night, I'm setting up cots in the Lockport community center. He comes through the door, carrying a plastic bag holding everything he has. I've never seen him here before. I can tell his jacket isn't warm enough. After he signs the intake sheet, he sits at one of the folding tables, a cup of scalding hot coffee in his hands. Doesn't talk to anyone and never says a word.

I sit down across from him. Not to assess him or process him. I'm not there to connect him to any outside resources. I just sit. Twenty minutes I sit there. That's what it takes before he says one word to me. And what does he say? Nothing to do with housing or services or what he needs from Winter Protocol's network. He tells me about his dog, Chomper, that he had to leave behind when he lost his apartment. His eyes glaze over talking about the pitbull. He talks long enough for our coffee to get cold.

I listen. That's it.

In the morning he's gone, like a ghost. I never caught his name. Never asked. I don't know what happened to him when he walked out the door with his plastic bag. Sure,

the system recorded his intake, and he appears in the annual report as one of 340 individuals served by Winter Protocol during the 2025-2026 season.

But it doesn't talk about Chomper, or that the man opened up to a volunteer at Winter Protocol. It never mentions that somewhere inside that conversation, something inside him relaxed, just slightly, the way a fist unclenches when it finally stops holding on. I don't know if that matters. I think it does. I can't prove it.

The magic number is still 28.

On the nights it drops below that number, the network is ready. Cots come out. Coffee is brewing. Volunteers drive in from the suburbs, doing something genuinely good, and go home tired in a way that feels earned.

Like them, I drive home.

On the other nights, it's 31 degrees in the parking garage off Route 30. The system is resting, waiting for the next cold day. And the cold? It doesn't know the difference and doesn't care.

I think about Diane sometimes. About the infrastructure she holds together with spreadsheets, phone calls, and sheer willpower. What would it take to build something that could see the 31 degree nights too? Funding. More volunteers. A lower threshold. And so much more that I don't know how you get there from here. I'm not sure anyone does yet. Not even Diane, workaholic that she is.

The plastic bag man is in the southwest suburbs tonight. The forecasters say 34. Winter Protocol is not active. The community center in Lockport is closed.

Plastic bag man found Chomper, or he didn't. He has a place to sleep, or he doesn't. The system worked on a 28-degree Wednesday in January. But Winter Protocol never followed up. It was designed to open when the number drops and close when the number rises, and it does that, reliably, every time.

The cold inside a person doesn't register on the weather service station in Romeoville.

Nobody put that in the policy manual.

That's the part I keep showing up for.

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