

## MOVCAC – Resiliency Center Not Used for Polar Vortex

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As a result of the Covid pandemic in 2020, federal budgets ballooned by around two trillion dollars. Prior to 2020 our federal government never spent more than \$4.5 trillion. After the pandemic, our federal government has never spent less than \$6.01 trillion. Part of that funding created by Covid was used in Parkersburg to build the new Resiliency Center on the banks of the Little Kanawha River.

In an article published by WTAP in September of 2022, County Commission President Blair Couch noted that the new \$13 million facility could be used for the following issues:

- Vaccine Distribution
- Flu Shots
- Food Distribution
- Meeting Spaces
- Warming Station
- Cooling Station

Mr. Couch’s quote in the article concluded with, “But the whole idea is, there’s nothing like this in Wood County. The ability to respond to different issues, that’s why it’s resilient.”



Wood County will be using 13 million dollars from its American Recovery Funds to build the multi-use building (Alexa Griffey)

[13 million dollar Resiliency Center to be built in Downtown Parkersburg](#) – WTAP September 12, 2022

As 2025 rolled in, frigid temperatures and snow bombarded the region. A state of emergency was issued in West Virginia on January 5, 2025 due to the extreme weather expected. As stated on Governor Morrisey’s website:

“The State of Emergency allows the West Virginia Emergency Management Division (WVEMD) to posture personnel and resources for quick response to any emergency that may develop.”

[GOV. MORRISEY URGES CAUTION, REMINDS WEST VIRGINIANS TO BE VIGILANT AND PREPARE FOR EXPECTED EXTREME COLD AND WINTER WEATHER](#)

On January 18, WTAP began reporting on the coming Polar Vortex. As part of that report, our area was expected to be hit with extreme cold:

“The Mid-Atlantic and Northeast also will have highs in the teens and 20s, lows in the single digits and below zero degrees F (minus 18 C) and wind chills below zero.”

[Extreme cold forecast for much of US in coming days](#) – WTAP January 18, 2025

As Mr. Couch explained in 2022, this is the exact type of emergency for which the Resiliency Center was commissioned. However, instead of preparing the Center for use as a warming station, the county relied on private entities. Commission President Blair Couch was again quoted by WTAP:

“We have spoke with the Salvation Army, American Red Cross, the Mid-Ohio Valley Health Department, the 911 Center, the sheriff, and there isn’t really a call for it,” Couch said. “But if there is, we do have facilities we can use as a warming center if they so desire. But we only have one employee at the Resiliency Center, and we have yet to officially open it.”

It should be noted that at the time of the above quote, Mr. Couch was also the president of the Mid-Ohio Valley Health Department. I cannot say why that detail was left out of the published report.

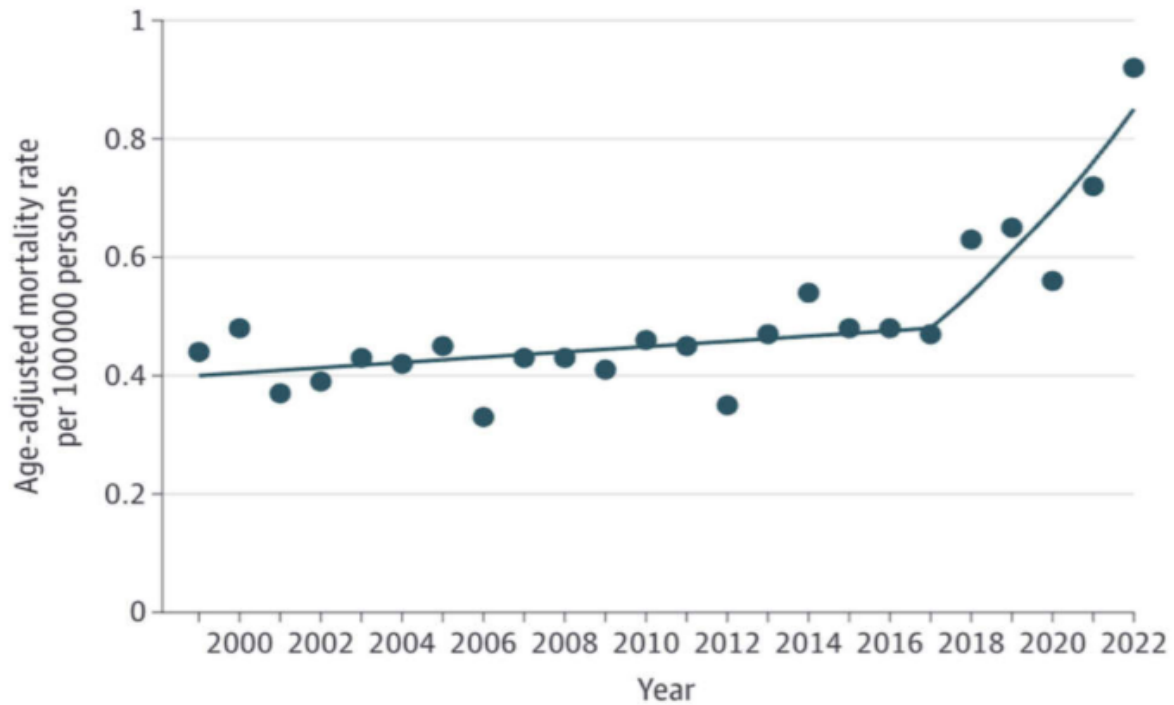
[Wood County officials prepared to offer warming center if needed, but not at the Resiliency Center](#) – WTAP January 21, 2025

As noted by WTAP in their March 31, 2023 interview with Matthew Hedrick (West Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness), Parkersburg’s homeless population had grown from 29 in 2018 to 79 in 2023. The services offered by both the County Commission and the Mid-Ohio Valley Health Department are not life-altering for those residing in the county’s affluent communities

of Greenmont, Windsor, Glendale, or Wyndemere. These services are most needed by those on the streets or close to being on the streets.

Leadership is not needed when the skies are sunny and the air is warm. Leadership is defined by what one does when lives are on the line. We talk about Climate Change and Global Warming, but it is the cold that takes lives in our country and that trend is only getting worse:

**A** Cold as underlying or contributing cause of death



Courtesy of "Cold deaths in the US" study, published in JAMA.

[Source - While earth warmed, cold weather killed more Americans](#) – wbur December 27, 2024

Isn't it the job of our elected leaders to anticipate the needs of their community when a known emergency is on the horizon? Who determines when and how this new \$13 million dollar facility is activated? What steps could have been taken to open the Resiliency Center to house the unhoused during such extreme weather?

On Thursday, January 30, 2025, residents of Wood County attended the County Commission meeting to ask those questions.

Before sharing the County Commission meeting and the reactions thereto, it should be noted that concerns about the Resiliency Center were shared with Parkersburg City Council in 2023. Those concerns were met with the same type of reaction you will see described in the remainder of this article.

[Parkersburg Resiliency Center City Council Comments January 2023](#) - YouTube

Following are quotes from several attendees prior to the start of the January 30, 2025 County Commission meeting:

“I'm here today to support the homeless community. I think there is an epidemic of funds that have been appropriated for county and city of Parkersburg that are not being distributed in the right direction. I think we need to take care of our people in the community and especially the homeless. Who else is going to help them. The community and the government need to step in and help.”

Autumn Moore

“I'm here in concern over the homeless and the weather conditions that we had, and the County Commission didn't step up to the plate. We have a facility, a new facility that would have taken care of the people. I'm just here to support the people that are in need. I'm going to hear what the county commissioners have to say about the new facility.”

Kay Ballway

“I am a citizen that likes to know what's going on in my community.”

Victoria West

A group of around twenty citizens representing several community organizations filled the County Commission meeting room. Mr. Couch opened by asking who was the leader of the group. Everyone sort of looked around because this was not one group and there was no spokesperson there representing everyone. Mr. Colombo was the other commissioner present. Commissioner Robert Tebay was absent. In stark contrast to Board of Education and City Council meetings, the commissioners allowed a lively discussion without any formal rules of engagement.

I encourage you to watch the full thirty-eight-minute Rumble video linked below.

[Wood County Commission](#) – January 30, 2025

It should be noted that County Commissioners are elected to lead the entire county and all the citizens thereof. Although combative at times, Mr. Colombo tried to engage those attending in a respectful and understanding way. The general concern of the citizenry revolved around the lack of use of the new Resiliency Center as a warming station, not only for the homeless, but for those with homes who could not properly heat their dwellings. There were questions about the stated justifications made by Mr. Couch in interviews prior to the construction of the

facility. As noted in the linked WTAP articles above, use as a warming station was specifically identified.

At the 6:20 minute mark of the video, one attendee can be heard asking “like a warming center?”

Mr. Couch’s reply, “A warming center for the homeless? No.”

At the 7:45 minute mark Mr. Colombo noted that they would have complied with the governor or sheriff’s request if there were an emergency. As noted above and reported to the commissioners during the meeting, Governor Morrissey issued a State of Emergency on January 5<sup>th</sup> due to the extreme weather. Mr. Colombo stated that they checked on each of the private shelters and that the 911 center donated cots.

Do we elect leaders in our community to only respond when someone above them in government requests their leadership? We knew in advance that an extreme weather event was heading toward our community. It is the job of leadership to anticipate the needs of the community and work diligently to meet those needs. Later in the video it was noted that the center was effectively used for election worker training prior to receiving any occupation permit. A special dispensation was allowed to accommodate the needs of our County Clerk and our election workers. If that could be anticipated, could we not anticipate the needs of our most vulnerable county residents or those in the county without a residence during a polar vortex?

When one attendee noted that we could have had a central location where all the volunteer work could have been coordinated, Mr. Colombo replied, “But that is central to you. To me, I mean, the City Building is central too. The Community Building in Vienna is central also. The Grand Central Mall is central...”

Again, Mr. Colombo was very respectful in his response, but none of those buildings were built using funds distributed due to a medical emergency (Covid pandemic). Nor were any of those buildings justified to the public as being useful as warming stations. Nor were any of those buildings justified to the public as being used to make Wood County more resilient.

When told that the Judge Black Annex was offered as a warming center from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., I emphasized that it is after 4:30 in the afternoon when the temperatures become most extreme. It was during the overnight hours that the unhoused or unwarm humans in Wood County needed a shelter the most. As was pointed out to me by Jaycee Ballard, who volunteers at House to Home, they were over occupancy and had people sleeping on benches. The cots offered by the 911 center could have easily been used in the new Resiliency Center.

“After weeks of helping to produce the resources to house not only our homeless community but families without adequate heat due to the below freezing temperatures, I was reminded of an article published in 2022 stating how our Resiliency Center would be used. I went to the

county commission meeting to ask one simple question. "Why were the doors not opened?" After not getting a clear answer to that question I asked, not once, but six times "What is an emergency situation to you (Mr. Couch)?" I never received an answer. Our taxpayers paid for a building with an assumption of how it would be used, per Mr. Couch's description, and received no answer to the most basic questions of its intended purpose. Choosing to be blind to a situation, a crisis, doesn't mean it isn't there. It's a sad day when the leaders of our community won't put their glasses on," Mrs. Ballard commented after the meeting.

At the 8:40 minute mark, Charles Roberts noted that under Covid money, this new facility was to be used for future pandemics or as an emergency shelter. During this exchange he also mentioned the woman who died while sleeping in a tent. Mr. Colombo proceeded to explain the circumstances that contributed to this woman's death and at one point mentioned that the police had offered her a free bus ride back to Missouri. It should be understood that some will never accept the offer of a warm shelter or assistance in returning home. However, one incident was not the point of this discussion.

During this same exchange, Mr. Couch responded to Mr. Roberts saying "Yes, if we had a power outage and it affected the property owners in Wood County, we would have opened it up." He emphasized shortly after, "We didn't build that under the impression that it would be a homeless shelter." No one had implied that, and the room erupted in response.

Again, I encourage you to watch the [entire video](#). MOVCAC has no budget nor do we have a technical team. I wish we had the staff to create smaller clips easier for sharing and I encourage anyone with the technical know-how and resources to create smaller clips that would be easier for sharing. WTAP did cover the meeting, and I encourage you to watch their coverage and compare that to the entirety of the meeting. Ask yourself if our local media is giving honest or balanced coverage to this very important issue.

#### [Questions asked about the Resiliency Center at Commission meeting](#) -WTAP January 30, 2025

Did WTAP cover the moment (beginning around the 16:25 minute mark of the video) when Taj Rohr followed up on an exchange Mr. Couch was having with Roger Conley regarding a purported phone call and Mr. Couch responded, "Taj, I'm not going to be put on the witness stand here."

Taj Rohr, "You're not going to be accountable to the people you work for is what you're saying."

"Yeah, because I don't think a single one of you voted for me. You all voted for him," Mr. Couch said as he pointed at Roger Conley.

Again, the room erupted with one attendee saying, "You only represent the people who voted for you?"

It should be noted that Roger Conley lost to Mr. Couch in the November 5<sup>th</sup> election. However, just because Mr. Conley lost that election doesn't mean he is no longer allowed to be concerned with how the County Commission is administered, nor does it mean he is not permitted to openly challenge that administration. In fact, later in the video Mr. Conley had each commissioner served with a FOIA (30:30 minute mark) asking specific questions about the new facility, its costs, and the emergencies for which it is intended to be used (among other questions). Once a response is received, the questions and responses will be published.

There were heated exchanges throughout. On two occasions, past interactions unrelated to the topic of the Resiliency Center were raised by the commissioners. At the 31:00 minute mark, Mr. Colombo appeared angry with Taj Rohr about some past event and vocalized his feelings.

Throughout the video you will see heated and unpleasant exchanges between Mr. Couch and the writer of this article. Prior to Covid, I had been a frequent and loyal customer of Mr. Couch's Hertz rental business. Our interactions in that capacity were always cordial, and I found Blair to be kind, helpful, and fair in our dealings. It has only been since the madness of Covid that our interactions turned sour. I have been a frequent visitor to the Mid-Ohio Valley Health Department of which Mr. Couch was the president until their January 23, 2025 meeting when he became the treasurer. I have been presenting catastrophic excess death data that I found concerning and have been asking for the Health Department to investigate. I have detailed this data in separate reports for all fifty-five counties in West Virginia.

[West Virginia Excess Deaths by County](#) – MOVAC.com

I have no doubt that Mr. Couch is tired of seeing me. I know I have worn out my welcome. However, just because I find myself living in a large warm home, living a healthy life - so far unaffected by either extreme cold or this catastrophic rise in death – doesn't mean I can sit back and watch as the leadership of our community ignores the plight of those less fortunate.

It seems that rather than a Resiliency Center we have constructed a Convention Center that will be used for large meetings and events. Throughout the meeting, Mr. Couch encouraged all the attendees to come to the grand opening to tour the building on Tuesday, February 4, 2025 at 11:00 a.m.

Please watch the entire video and understand how your government works. See how your leaders interact with concerned citizens. Understand how your local media acts as a mouthpiece for our government rather than informing the public with actual news and details. We as citizens must learn again how to be participants in our Constitutional Republic. Our elected leaders must learn again how to interact effectively with the citizens they wish to serve. Perhaps we have all lost our way and forgotten how to work together for the benefit of society as a whole. I pray that better days are ahead for all of us.

Thank you to all those who took time out of their busy days to attend and voice their concerns. Thank you to the commissioners for allowing an open and lively debate.

United We Stand - Divided We Fall is not just a cliché; it is wisdom we should take as a warning.