

Update to the Board of Commissioners of the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board

**Status of Alternative Shelter Opportunities to
Accommodate Unsheltered Homeless in Minneapolis Parks**

Submitted by Al Bangoura, Superintendent
15 September 2020

As part of Resolution 2020-267, adopted by the Board of Commissioners on July 15, 2020, staff of the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) was directed to “provide an update on progress toward moving encampment occupants into shelter and housing suitable for winter conditions,” with a goal of September 15, 2020 for the delivery of that update. In preparing this update, staff is relying on communications from the Governor’s Office as well as less formal but highly reliable information from its peers at city, county and state government levels who provide services to unhoused individuals.

Throughout the period of the encampments, MPRB staff have been able to define a short list of partner agency staff whose insights and opinions have shaped the MPRB’s interactions with the encamped individuals. Their insights relative to alternative housing opportunities suggest the pool of available opportunities is growing more limited as the weather becomes colder.

Important in this discussion is the inability of MPRB staff to track, monitor or anticipate movements of encamped individuals, whether into, out of, or between temporary encampments in Minneapolis parks or movements to an alternative and available form of shelter. Counting the estimated number of tents in a temporary park encampment has been fluid and challenging; tracking encamped individuals is, simply, not possible with the resources available to staff.

The point regarding tracking encamped individuals is important because staff noted a rather dramatic decrease in the availability of all types of shelter at the first significantly cold weather of the season last week when overnight temperatures dropped to 38 to 45 degrees multiple nights, 10 to 17 degrees colder than the historic average according to the AccuWeather website. In October, the average low temperature drops to 40 degrees F, down 12 degrees from the average low temperature in September. While October’s average high temperature is 58 degrees F, it’s the average low temperature that is of greater concern for unsheltered individuals. Therefore, as staff was directed to prepare this update recognizing winter conditions, it’s framed in more critical conditions related to cold weather.

Response to MPRB letter from State of Minnesota

A letter from President Cowgill and Superintendent Bangoura was emailed to Governor Walz on August 28, 2020 requesting information regarding the status of new shelter opportunities with a focus on funding and timing. Governor Walz’s September 4 response addressed funding, amounting to more than 48 million in federal and state funds, already committed to local entities to address housing and homelessness in response to COVID-19, with more than \$23 million

allocated as of the date of the letter and 43 percent of the allocated amount directed to Hennepin County, the City of Minneapolis, the MPRB, and nonprofits operating in those jurisdictions.

The Walz letter continues, suggesting other resources that have been directed to housing and homelessness, the allocation of CARES Act Emergency Solutions Grant funds, and the lack of a request for new emergency shelter capacity in a joint response from the city and county for CARES Act ESG funds. The letter also references a meeting where state officials participated with representatives of the county, city and MPRB, as well as the state's participation in ongoing meetings convened by the City of Minneapolis.

A substantial portion of the Governor's letter is directed to a recap of Executive Orders 20-20, 20-47 and 20-55, wherein the key aspects of each order's relationship to homelessness and encampments is summarized. This portion of the letter also references MPRB Resolution 2020-253 which designated parks as a refuge for individuals experiencing homelessness, noting that it is significant to the extent of encampments that have occurred in Minneapolis parks.

The letter concludes with statements looking forward, including the Governor's proposal to direct \$260 million in housing focused investments in his bonding recommendations, which is currently held up in the legislature.

Information from City of Minneapolis

Staff from the City of Minneapolis Community Planning and Economic Development provided the following summary of activities, including many activities done in partnership between the City and Hennepin County:

Even with resources stretched thin to respond to the COVID pandemic, the shelter system is providing shelter for 215 more single adults than it was at this time last year. Additionally, all single adult shelters are operating 24 hours per day, seven days per week in response to COVID.

The City of Minneapolis and Hennepin County, along with community partners, the State of Minnesota and philanthropy, have committed to expand shelter capacity for three projects:

- A culturally specific emergency shelter for the City's Native American population: The proposed shelter at Cedar and Franklin avenues is a partnership with the American Indian Community Development Corp. (AICDC) to purchase and renovate several buildings to accommodate a 24-hour, 50-bed emergency shelter with services. The project is funded by the City, County, State and philanthropic partners. It is expected to open in December.
- Women's Shelter: A proposed 30-bed women's shelter, this project is a partnership with Hennepin County and Salvation Army as shelter operator. The County has committed operating funding and is looking for a site. The City has committed ESG funding to complete necessary renovations. It is expected that a temporary location may be opened this winter and a permanent site renovated in 2021.

- Exodus 2: A new development in the Elliot Park neighborhood will serve medically frail homeless individuals leaving the hospital. An existing six-story building that previously operated as a nursing home will be turned into a 167-unit housing development with an additional six units of transitional housing for homeless veterans and 30 medical respite beds. It is expected to be operational by fall 2021. Catholic Charities will own and operate this property. It is funded by the City, County, State and private partners.

In addition to expanded shelter capacity in those three projects, on September 15 a new floor will open at Simpson Housing's shelter that will provide an additional 20 women's shelter beds. Beyond that new shelter capacity, the City and County have taken on the following:

- issued a joint request for proposals (RFP) in July for community proposals for emergency shelter, street outreach, rapid re-housing and homelessness prevention. After thorough review by city and county staff, community partners and people with lived experience of homelessness, the City and County will be providing funding for additional street outreach capacity, a new shelter diversion program, and funding to ensure that the existing emergency shelters can remain open 24 hours per day, 7 days per week in a COVID safe manner for the next two years.
- jointly have added street outreach capacity throughout the summer, with new contracts for AICDC (both City and County), Avivo (City) and Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center (County).

The City is in conversations with the state and community partners exploring possibilities for other projects and initiatives to bring shelter beds online for the winter. Provider capacity has and continues to be one of the challenges to bringing more capacity online.

Finally, but importantly, the City continues to focus on creating permanent housing opportunities for people experiencing homelessness. An estimated 110 new units designated for persons experiencing homelessness will be available for occupancy in Minneapolis from July 2020 through February 2021 (funded by City, County, State and the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority). An estimated 290 new units designated for persons experiencing homelessness will close on City and County, State, and/or MPHA funding programs and start construction in 2020. City staff are working on changes to the zoning code to allow for new types of housing, such as Single Room Occupancy, that will help people experiencing homelessness gain access to housing.

Information from Hennepin County

Hennepin County and staff from the County's Office to End Homelessness have been a supportive partner to the MPRB. In addition to the initiatives captured in the City's summary, which includes a strong partnership with Hennepin County, county staff have provided the following summaries:

On September 8, following the first cold weather of the season, Hennepin County reported that there were no beds for single adult males, 12 beds available for single adult women, and 21

family shelter rooms available. While those numbers may vary from day to day, the likelihood of a significant number of beds being available to meet the needs of any category of unsheltered homeless seems remote.

Hennepin County continues to operate under a right-to-shelter policy for families with children and has private rooms available at People Serving People and Saint Anne's. In total there were about 1,345 people in shelter last night, and since the start of 2020, more than 1,200 people have exited homelessness to permanent housing through the combined efforts of our community partners.

Information from State of Minnesota

In addition to the response from Governor Walz, staff at the Minnesota Interagency Council on Homelessness summarized several State activities supporting expanded shelter and housing capacity, including:

- Providing millions of dollars in State funding to support new protective spaces, outreach, staffing and supplies, as well as hotel-to-home opportunities in the Twin Cities since March. This month, \$19 million of the State's CRF has also been allocated to support people experiencing homelessness through counties and non-profits. Applications for funding supporting the hotel-to-home model for funding are currently available through the State.
- Implementing a staffing contract with 22nd Century Staffing to support some hotels and looking for ways to support additional spaces.
- Using the State's Housing Supports Program in addition to State general fund and Federal CARES Act funding extensively to help create hundreds of hotel-to-home opportunities in the metro area since March. The current iteration of this model is underway this week to move people from encampment at the Wall of Forgotten Natives, through a partnership between Red Lake Nation and Avivo.
- Committing state, county, and city funding to support a new permanent 24-hour shelter in Minneapolis operated by the American Indian Community Development Corporation, targeting people living in encampments and other unsheltered locations. The facility is slated to open in early December.
- Committing, through the Metropolitan Council, \$1million for capital to support non-time limited shelter/permanent housing development.

Beyond those current activities, the State is pursuing long-term plans to develop affordable housing. Representatives of the State note the Walz-Flanagan Administration is deeply committed to securing housing affordability long term. In January 2020 the State made the largest request for housing bonding in state history with \$200 million in housing infrastructure bonds and \$100 million in general obligation bonds to reinvest in public housing. The State notes it is up to the Legislature to pass the bonding bill and that did not happen during the spring session nor any of the special sessions to date.

The State also notes that in 2019, Minnesota Housing selected the most affordable developments for financing in the agency's history. The selections included:

- 579 units, with and without rental assistance, that will be affordable to Minnesotans at the lowest incomes (30% AMI).
- 556 units that preserve existing rental housing. This reflects an increase of 28 percent in total units preserved over last year.
- 221 units specifically set aside to serve people with disabilities.
- 556 units that will provide permanent supportive housing.

Finally, the State summarizes new investments made since March as follows:

- \$100 million has been directed to prevent homelessness and maintain housing stability for renters and homeowners through the COVID-19 Housing Assistance Program. More information is available at the COVID-19 Housing Assistance Program website, including information regarding eligibility requirements. The State notes that applications can be obtained by calling 211, visiting 211unitedway.org, or texting "MNRENT" or "MNHOMES" to 898-211.
- \$26.5 million in state general fund has been allocated to that Emergency Services Program (ESP), supporting more than 2300 protective hotel spaces statewide along with staffing, sanitation, outreach and personal protective equipment support for shelters and providers.
- \$22 million in Coronavirus Relief Funds (CRF) has been directed to continue activities currently supported by ESP. Eligible activities include emergency food for shelters and encampments, shelter capacity, hygiene and sanitation supplies, staffing, and light rehab. These resources are available through a rolling survey. The State indicates that eligible entities can apply at <https://headinghomealliance.com/funding-resources-for-covid-response/>.
- \$5.5 million has been directed to a 15% rate increase in Housing Support contracts for March, April, and May. The State's housing support program has been a critical ingredient in the Hotel to Home model in the Twin Cities.
- \$22 million in Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) funds has been awarded through the CARES Act. The Request for Proposals for the first round of funding, ESG-CV1 totaling \$7 million, targeted emergency shelter operations and unsheltered street outreach. Another Request for Proposals for the second round of funding, ESG-CV2 totaling \$15 million, will be issued in the coming weeks and will target emergency shelter operations, rapid re-housing and prevention. Since some jurisdictions receive direct "entitlement" allocations of these funds, the State must take a statewide approach when considering proposals for ESG.

Encampments and cold weather

Complicating the shortage of available shelter opportunities is the anticipated date of opening of cold weather shelters, which is typically in December according to our partners. From the perspective of park encampments, the cold weather noted above is already present and leaves encamped individuals exposed to the cold weather for at least ten weeks. Cold weather poses a threat to those experiencing homelessness even when temperatures seem mild. Hypothermia can set in when temperatures drop below 50 degrees, but many shelters don't open until it's much colder, according to information provided by the National Healthcare for the Homeless Council.

Complicating the current situation, the MPRB does not allow open fires or the use of propane as a fuel for a fire in parks. As a result, the potential for generating heat is very limited for those encamped in Minneapolis parks. Allowing the use of fuels for fire or to create warmth poses great risk for encamped persons and for park assets. The use of firewood poses a similar danger not only for the risk of fire but also by introducing diseased wood into park areas. One common way to spread diseases which affect trees is through the use of firewood. The Park Board spends millions of dollars each year to protect the urban forest and firewood is a real and direct threat to that asset. Park Board staff firmly believes that the onset of cold weather should result in a disbandment of remaining encampments during October with the primary goal of protecting those encamped individuals from cold weather.

MPRB outreach staff are informing those living in temporary park encampments that they will not be able to stay in the parks once cold weather arrives and stays, which staff predicts will be in October. Staff will continue to work with their counterparts at the city, county, and state to move those currently encamped in Minneapolis parks to available shelter so that the least possible encamped individuals remain in Minneapolis parks on the date determined for disbandment.