New St. Paul shelter offers paths out of homelessness

*St. Paul's Higher Ground facility goes beyond crisis management to keep people off the streets.*

By Shannon Prather;
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*LEFT:* The $100 million project shepherded by Catholic Charities is one of the largest public-private partnerships in state history

*RIGHT:* Camille Mitchell-Pasha lost her job and apartment as a result of seizures. "It's a blessing because I had nothing." She reads the Bible regularly, including Psalms which comfort her.

For decades, homelessness in St. Paul was treated like a crisis, and the Dorothy Day Center was its overflowing, overtaxed emergency room.

Each night hundreds of homeless men and women shuffled into the worn-out downtown facility for a warm meal and a spot on the floor to sleep, and then scooted out in the early morning hours — often to linger on the sidewalk out front.

The daily ritual amounted to lifesaving triage from cold and hunger, but it lacked dignity, let alone a clear path out of homelessness.

“It became a place where people didn't have hope. People didn't believe in themselves,” said Catholic Charities President and CEO Tim Marx.

But this month Catholic Charities opened a modern $40 million facility on the old site, offering three tiers of accommodations all under the same roof: free emergency bunk beds, more private nightly cot and locker rentals, and permanent apartments.
The Higher Ground facility across from the Xcel Center is the first of two new structures that will replace the old Dorothy Day Center. The second facility will include more housing, a veterans resource hub, a health clinic and a workforce development training center.

The goal is to move beyond crisis management and find ways to help people stay off the streets. “We are providing support to allow them to do for themselves,” Marx said. “We are making sure the safety net we provide is really a trampoline.”

When both buildings are complete, the $100 million project will be one of the largest public-private social services partnerships in state history. It took in contributions from the state, Ramsey County and 400 individuals, corporations and foundations, Marx said.

“It’s a much more holistic approach to ending homelessness — taking a deep dive on stabilizing people’s lives and providing services,” said St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman.

**Facing things head-on**

Marx — an attorney who has served as St. Paul deputy mayor and as state housing commissioner for Gov. Tim Pawlenty — leaned on that web of connections to get buy-in for the project. Catholic Charities still needs state bonding for the second building, and Gov. Mark Dayton has included money for the second phase in his proposed budget.

Marx has “been able to thread that needle with philanthropy, corporate leadership and the political lifting that needed to be done on the project,” Coleman said.

The Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation donated $5 million to kick-start the project. A host of other foundations and businesses — Target Corp., U.S. Bank Foundation, Ecolab Foundation, 3M Co., Hardenbergh Foundation, Premier Banks, Frey Foundation, Carl and Eloise Pohlad Family Foundation and the Julie and Doug Baker Jr. Foundation — each contributed $1 million or more.

Coleman said the newer buildings are more functional and attractive than the old Dorothy Day Center. Keeping them in a highly visible location near Xcel Center also is a way of acknowledging and addressing homelessness head-on, he said.

“People really felt we needed to be honest about the homeless situation and not try to hide it in some isolated neighborhood,” the mayor said.

The new building includes a secure and dignified emergency shelter on the first floor that provides bunk beds and lockers. At the old building, people slept shoulder to shoulder on thin mats on the floor.

The upper floors are designed to transition people out of homelessness. The second floor has a pay-for-stay ward where people may reserve a bed and locker for $7 a night. It enables homeless clients to hold down a job or connect with services for veterans or people with disabilities.

**‘A hub of hope’**

Catholic Charities saves that pay-for-stay money for clients and offers up to $500 back to them, to use as the first month’s rent or damage deposit on either a place outside the facility or in the 193 permanent apartments upstairs. Nearly 150 of the latter are already occupied.

Camille Mitchell-Pasha moved into an apartment at Higher Ground after sleeping at the old center. She lost her job and apartment as a result of seizures and other health issues. Stable housing allows her to keep up with her medicine and maintain her health.

“It’s a blessing, because I had nothing,” she said.
The three tiers of housing can accommodate 473 people in all. Caseworkers have identified Dorothy Day’s 100 most frequent visitors and focused on providing them with help and a plan to move up. The $100 million project directed by Catholic Charities is one of the largest public-private partnerships in state history.

“This is a proven model,” Marx said. “We are combining compassion and common sense.”

Higher Ground in Minneapolis, a smaller version of the St. Paul counterpart, opened in 2012. Since then, about 378 people have transitioned to permanent housing.

Arthur Mercier is one of them. Mercier, 54, was a short-order cook for 30 years until a back injury cost him his job. Unable to pay the rent, he lost his apartment in 2001 and then spent a decade drifting between homeless shelters and couches belonging to friends and family members.

He arrived at Higher Ground Minneapolis on a cold night in December 2012 and spent three weeks in the first-floor emergency shelter before moving up to the second-floor pay-for-stay quarters.

“You get your locker. You don’t have to carry your stuff around all day. It’s a lot quieter. A lot of people on the second floor work,” Mercier said.

He moved into one of Higher Ground’s apartments on March 26, 2013 — a day he remembers clear as a bell. It was the first time he’d had his own apartment in more than a decade, a private room with a microwave and refrigerator. Residents share bathrooms and kitchen facilities, and drinking is prohibited.

“That took a lot of stress off my shoulders,” he said.

Catholic Charities requires that he spend $106 a month on rent. That’s more than half the $203 the state gives him in general assistance, but Mercier said he didn’t hesitate to take the apartment. “I’ve learned to make $97 stretch throughout the entire month,” he said.

Catholic Charities provides him a bus pass, cellphone and an $85 food card each month.

“When people have a key, there is that sense of dignity and belonging,” Marx said.

“We are going to be a hub of hope.”