With extended hours, Minneapolis shelters hope to reduce homelessness

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Emmanuel Tatlingfong, left, and Dave Baker left the Higher Ground Shelter at about 8:30 a.m. A new contract lets two shelters stay open later. Photo: Richard Tsong-Taatarii

Dave Baker shares a bedroom with more than 60 other people, so he knows how precious a good night’s sleep can be.

“The guy next to you could be snoring, he could be on the phone,” said Baker, 48, who has been staying at the Higher Ground Shelter in Minneapolis for 14 months. “You may be up at 2, 3, 5 and 11 the night before. Any sleep you get in here is a benefit.”

Baker also knows what it’s like to wake up before the rest of the city, since Twin Cities homeless shelters have historically pushed residents out the door around 7 a.m. because of staff shortages or the need to prepare the space for its daytime use.

Now a $100,000 contract from Hennepin County has permitted two Minneapolis shelters — Catholic Charities’ Higher Ground and Simpson Housing Services — to extend their hours so that residents don’t have to depart at the crack of dawn.

“It’s awfully nice not to have to put people out in the cold on those dark, bitterly cold mornings at 7 a.m.,” said Steve Horsfield, executive director of Simpson Housing Services, which just expanded its shelter hours to open at 5 p.m. and close at 9 a.m.

Men and women who find themselves on the street at 6:45 a.m. face a long wait before they can get into local libraries or social service offices such as the Opportunity Center, run by Catholic Charities, which offers medical care, counseling, employment services and housing assistance.

In addition to reducing stress on residents and giving them time to prepare for the day, Horsfield said, the new hours...
put his clients on the same schedule as social workers and other professionals who can help them find jobs and housing.

The extended-hours contract is part of a larger Hennepin County strategy to tackle homelessness. It also includes expanding street outreach and adding 500 units of affordable housing designated for homeless residents in and around downtown Minneapolis by 2025, according to Mikkel Beckmen, director of the Minneapolis-Hennepin County Office to End Homelessness.

Hennepin County data show that shelters for single adults are frequently filled to capacity. The county has three privately run church shelters and two publicly funded ones, which altogether provide 763 beds for single homeless adults nightly. That figure grows by 100 beds during the coldest months of the year.

Their world in a duffel bag

Baker, who began staying at Higher Ground after losing his job as a deliveryman, said he usually winds up at the shelter by 6:30 p.m. for dinner, but that other guests work late shifts and might walk in around 2 a.m. For them, he said, every minute of sleep counts.

Manny Taitingfong, 49, who has been homeless for three years, makes an hourlong commute to his job as a chef at Naomi Family Center in St. Paul. He is a pay-for-stay client at Higher Ground, which means his spot is guaranteed and comes with his own locker.

But in the building’s downstairs emergency shelter, guests have to leave each day, usually carrying everything they own. Taitingfong said he’s seen people drop to the ground and rushed to the hospital after days lugging around their world in a duffel bag.

“It can be hard — walking the snow, freezing out there,” said. “It’s really brutal.”

Horsfield said he’s seen that sort of exhaustion firsthand.

“We have a number of guests who arrive in the evening when we open the doors, walk in … put down their belongings and lay down,” he said. “It is hard work to be without stable housing.”

Taitingfong is anticipating a permanent home in the coming months in an apartment at Evergreen Residence, a Catholic Charities facility next to Higher Ground. But he’ll be back at the shelter soon enough, he said — this time as a volunteer.

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