Dorothy Day celebrates its last Thanksgiving feast before moving to Higher Ground

The mood is upbeat as staff prepares a move to the more spacious Higher Ground.

By Shannon Prather Star Tribune
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http://www.startribune.com/dorothy-day-center-celebrates-last-thanksgiving-in-old-crummed-space/402738046/

A cadre of volunteers carved up 18 roasted turkeys Wednesday for the final Thanksgiving Day feast at the Dorothy Day Center, St. Paul's seminal homeless shelter. The mood was jovial as the Catholic Charities institution is preparing to move from its cramped quarters that its own leaders characterize as "undignified, overwhelmed and overcrowded" into a newly constructed building aptly called Higher Ground.

Higher Ground will accommodate as many as 473 homeless and struggling people with a continuum of housing options ranging from an emergency overnight shelter to permanent supportive housing for the most vulnerable who have lived on the streets for long periods of time. Staff plans to make the move in mid-December.

The new space will offer a more "dignified environment," said Catholic Charities spokeswoman Therese Gales.

Longtime volunteer Arlene Leyden was part of the carving crew Wednesday.

“Oh my! It’s going to be wonderful,” Leyden said of the imminent move. “Everyone is looking forward to it especially our clients.”

(more)
Currently, Dorothy Day staff members push aside tables and chairs every night so as many as 250 homeless people can sleep indoors overnight on 2-inch mats placed on the floor. The room can become so crowded that they lay shoulder to shoulder.

The new emergency shelter at Higher Ground will have semiprivate bunk beds on the first floor. The second floor will have pay-for-stay overnight accommodations for those transitioning from life on the street and the third floor will have permanent supportive housing.

Higher Ground, which measures 111,261 square feet, cost $40 million to build.

“The anticipation of being in a better place at this time of year is palpable,” said Catholic Charities President and CEO Tim Marx, who recently spent some time talking with the clients they serve.

After the move, the old shelter building will be replaced with the Opportunity Center, which will include offices and more housing.

Dorothy Day Center served 307,000 meals and provided 75,000 nights of shelter in 2015. Built in 1993, it was never intended to be an overnight shelter, Marx said.

The charity responded to the pressing need in the mid 1990s, opening its doors to overnight clients.

While the old emergency shelter triaged the immediate crisis, Higher Ground will be a more evolved, systemic approach.

“You get a chance to reset your entire approach starting with a physical facility,” Marx said. “Our goal is to make homelessness rare, very brief and nonrecurring. When people enter the homelessness system, they can get trapped there. We want to provide a trampoline.”