OPINION: Homeless-camp evacuation was necessary. So is our work to find warm, safe spaces for each person.

Coauthored By:
- Tim Marx, President and CEO, Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis
- Christine Michels, Senior Program Manager, Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis
- Jodi Harder, Program Director, RADIAS Health
- David Katzenmeyer, Program Supervisor, People Incorporated

November 21, 2018

Thursday was a difficult day in St. Paul – a day that shed light on the heart-wrenching reality for many in our community. While service providers connect with people experiencing homelessness year-round in our city, the approach of dangerous winter conditions brings added attention to the hundreds of people each night who are looking for a warm place to stay.

We respect the recent evacuation of the encampment in St. Paul. From fires to cold temperatures to nearby traffic risks to the potential for dangerous incidents, the risks it posed for residents were potentially life-threatening.

We also support continued broader efforts to find warm, safe spaces for each person. We know that the encampment is only a sliver of the homeless population in St. Paul. Our shelters are near capacity each night. There are people utilizing public transit, skyways, vestibules and camps as their safe havens. As a community we cannot be content with people seeking shelter in areas that were not meant for human habitation.

We have come to know the encampment and its residents well. Service providers from Catholic Charities, RADIAS Health, and People Incorporated have been at the encampment in St. Paul since it first appeared nearly seven months ago, working with individuals to understand their needs and circumstances. No one life circumstance is the same, meaning no one solution for someone experiencing homelessness is the same, either. From partners to personal property to mental health crises to chemical dependency issues, we have been working to forge inroads, offer options, and earn the trust of our neighbors who are in these dire situations.

And although the encampment has closed, our work does not stop. The housing crisis plaguing our city — and indeed our nation — has real implications for real people. Skyrocketing rents, a lack of affordable housing, and a need for more mental health and substance abuse services are contributing to the rise of unsheltered homeless individuals in St. Paul and cities across the nation.

In the East Metro region, leadership and collaboration by the city, county, private and nonprofit sectors is advancing sustainable long-term solutions. For the past three years, this community coalition – called Outside In – has been working to fund more outreach workers, provide more shelter through the creation
of the Winter Safe Space in downtown St. Paul, and help long-term shelter users move into more permanent housing. We commend and appreciate this cross-sector leadership.

We are working to add more spaces at our overnight and short-term shelters for those leaving the encampment. We have already allocated beds at the Winter Safe Space specifically for the people who were evacuated on Thursday. We’re also working to develop long-term systemic solutions, including increasing the affordable housing supply, reducing barriers that prevent people experiencing homelessness from getting housing, and providing long-term support to help prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place.

We urge each of you to join us. Share your voice and call for more permanent housing for our neighbors in need. Volunteer to support those in need. We have much work to do to fully address and end homelessness. And all of us are needed.

Each December, many of us gather to mourn our neighbors who have experienced homelessness, those who have died with nowhere else to go. It is our hope that we see a day where we no longer need to hold such a memorial – and we continue to work tirelessly to make it so.