

Kansas City homeless program could be model for mental illness treatment, advocates say

June 5 2023, by Anna Spoerre



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After leaving prison, where he'd been incarcerated for nearly three decades, a man in his 60s took up residence in the woods of Kansas City,

where he stayed for five years.

He eventually found his way to City Union Mission's emergency [homeless shelter](#), where staff learned he'd been panhandling to pay for his eyesight medication.

At the shelter, they pegged him as a good fit for the L. Minor Care Center next door, a program that helps connect men with high needs to long-term supportive housing, however long it takes.

Once at the center, staff connected the man with a [health care provider](#) who covered his medications and delivered them to him. He doesn't have a move-out deadline, and all the services are free.

The man, upon learning this, started crying.

"This is the first time I feel like anybody's ever cared for me," Amanda Greene, the center's administrator, recalled him saying.

In the five years since opening, nearly 700 men have come through the center, with most staying for about 150 days, though some have stayed for years before transitioning into permanent supportive housing, City Union Mission leadership said.

Of those, 75% were still in permanent housing a year later.

"We're finding that's really the sweet spot that's missing in Kansas City, is this non-clinical, but high-touch, high-investment opportunity for them to just relax and feel at home and for us to start working toward, where is the best place we can place them," said Terry Megli, CEO of City Union Mission, which runs the center.

All the men at the center have been chronically homeless, and about

80% were previously institutionalized. About 60% have a traumatic brain injury, and almost everyone has experienced some sort of addiction.

Almost every resident suffers from multiple mental health disorders and/or physical disabilities, Megli said, with about half using a wheelchair, cane or walker. Many also suffer from addiction. Some of the men's needs are too high even for emergency or cold-weather shelters, Greene added.

This means each guest needs a personalized experience. And that starts with helping the men overcome their stigma about being homeless and learn to recognize their own worth, she said.

They focus on building trust, creating a routine, getting on a medical management program and learning to relax, now that they're in a safe space. Once that foundation is built, they look for permanent housing.

About 10 men are currently on the center's waiting list, though Greene estimated there are thousands of people in the metro who could benefit from their program. It's why Megli is in the process of creating a similar program for women and families.

Kansas City's homeless population has grown in visibility, and likely size in the past few years, as the pandemic forced more people into fraught financial situations. Right now, an estimated 1,800 people are living unhoused in Kansas City, Missouri, alone, according to a recent estimate by the Greater Kansas City Coalition to End Homelessness

These numbers are part of the reason Megli is hoping to draw more attention to the success of the L. Minor Care Center, which he hopes to expand into a similar program for women and children. With the right resources, staff said, they hope to help hundreds more people.

Growing mental health needs

At the turn of the century, a former City Union Mission staffer named Loraine Minor recognized a growing need to address mental illness in Kansas City's homeless population.

The center, her namesake, finally opened in 2018 on East 10th Street next to their men's shelter. They now have a team of about 20 people, including case managers, administrators and overnight staff who help cater to the individual adaptive living needs of each man. The program has cost just under \$4 million in five years through donations.

Staff at the men's emergency shelter are trained to help identify individuals with mental health and physical health needs. From there, L. Minor Care Center staff run a vulnerability assessment to determine if they are high risk and could benefit from the program.

Once they've joined the center, the men can stay as long as they need to until they find permanent supportive housing, staff say. And if they leave and then later face homelessness again, they're welcomed back to try again. Unlike most emergency shelters, they don't have to leave during the day; and unlike many transitional housing opportunities, there's no move-out deadline.

Many of the men have to re-learn how to take care of themselves after years spent living on the street, Greene said. Others need around-the-clock nursing and support. Most of the men, including those with diabetes, are given resources to learn how to take care of their health. The center helps connect each person with a primary care doctor, and clinicians make stops by the center at least once a month.

"There's so many resources in Kansas City, it's just connecting all the dots," Greene said.

Then there's the journey to independence and confidence.

"We really don't want them to come in thinking they're labeled, that something is broken and that they have a mental health issue," Megli said. "We want to be able to draw out who they really are."

Green helps lead the charge.

She started volunteering at City Union Mission three days after she retired from the Army, fulfilling an inner calling to work with the homeless. Within a few months she was hired to lead their newly-opened L. Minor Care Center.

She knows what it's like to be part of an institution. Some of the men were also in the military. Others were in prison, or rehabilitation centers, or homeless shelters.

It's why she tries to incorporate a mix of routine and structure with flexibility and freedom. When a new person joins, staff sketch out a plan based on their wants and needs. From there, they can take as much or as little time as they need to reach those goals.

It gives staff the ability to help cater to the men's individual, complex needs in ways that most shelters can't.

"I love our staff having that commitment and resolve to say, if someone comes back and needs help, this just means we're going to do it better. ... we won't give up on them, whether it takes 30 days or 3.5 years," Megli said.

A place for community

When he was in his late 20s, John Tyree Davis said he lost his job and

later his housing after overworking himself, unable to find a good balance between work and life.

Greene met Davis, who was born and raised on Kansas City's east side, at City Union Mission's emergency shelter and recommended he join the center as one of its youngest residents.

"It picked me up, brought me to good spirits," Davis, now 32, said of the center. "Here, it's nothing but pure love."

He found relief from worrying where his next meal might come from, or where to lay his head. But more importantly, he said, he found community, balance and hope.

"I come from a place where you can be down and out in life, you can be homeless, but you have to find those little things that make you want to push yourself to do better," said Davis, who was filled with inspirational sayings like those seen on classroom walls, like: "Just keep trying. You get knocked down, pick yourself back up and continue on. Dust yourself off and let's go again until we get it right."

He constantly reminds himself that his life matters.

Now Davis, who recently moved into a home with three other men who also transitioned out of the shelter, uses those skills to help care for others as a caretaker for the elderly.

He fears that without the center, he'd be back on the streets or in jail.

Kansas City needs more opportunities like the L. Minor Care Center, Davis said. The fact that guests can stay as long as they need to sort out their affairs is huge in helping them to transition out successfully. The ongoing education about life off the streets was invaluable.

Irvin Hernandez, 65, agrees.

Hernandez, who came to the U.S. from Chapas, Mexico, a few decades ago, joined the center about four years ago.

He moved to Kansas City in 2000. He had it all: a job in construction, a house, a car.

But he lost it all after suffering a heart attack and stroke. Shortly before he found City Union Mission's emergency men's shelter, Hernandez was sleeping on the streets, where he attempted to kill himself.

"City Union Mission saved my life," he said, later adding, "It's like a family here."

Hernandez no longer lives at the center, but he likes to come back to visit his friends. A staffer checks in on him at his new home at least once a week to drop off his medication and make sure everything is going well. Recently, they helped Hernandez get a new wheelchair.

The community-building is intentional. It's a way to foster trust and friendship that will hopefully serve the men long after they've left the center.

"We find something good in everyone who comes through those doors," said Edwin Jackson, a case manager, who pointed out photos on a bulletin board of previous residents who've since moved out, one of whom Jackson still takes to church each week.

Davis is a giver of his time and help, even when someone doesn't want it, Jackson said. Hernandez is an encourager, even when he struggles to encourage himself.

"Sometimes we overlook people. We forget that they're no different," Jackson said. "Their path might've been different than yours ... the only difference is, sometimes society says, 'they're no use to us' and we find use in everybody."

A day at the center

The men's wake-up call is between 6 and 6:30 each morning. Breakfast is at 7, where the men are often found drinking coffee, watching the news or playing cards in the gathering room next to lockers labeled with their names on paper pineapples. A "Go Army" stamp was taped above a "Go Navy" sticker.

Upstairs, the beds are nicely made up by the guests, who tighten and tuck the sheets every morning as part of their routines. A poster on one bedroom door read: "The greatest adventure is yet to come."

A quick group meeting follows where the men can connect with their case managers. Then it's laundry day for some and all hands on deck to clean the common rooms. Then they're free to go about their day, either in the center or in the [city](#).

On average, between 15 and 24 men fill the rooms of this center, with an average age of 55, but with guests as old as 84 and as young as 18.

After lunch, the group reconvenes for community time. This is when Greene teaches about leisure and recreation. In other words, they learn how to have fun and express themselves, whether through art, music or something else. It all goes toward the goal of providing the men comfort, care and life skills.

"Gentlemen," Greene begins one afternoon, as the couple dozen men in the room slowly shifted to face her for a recent meeting, the last of the

day before dinner.

"We're in a fallen world, so we have a negative filter, so we automatically can look for everything that's wrong with ourselves, with each other, what's around us. So it takes a room full of geniuses and gentleman and ladies like all of you to look for what's good," she begins.

Greene asked the group to name three positive small happenings that day. She starts: three new men moved into the center.

"I got up this morning," said a man who was previously shot in the face.

I get to go to the library tomorrow, another said.

Another man chimed in and said he lost his backpack with paperwork somewhere. Greene assured him they'd find it, and then that could be his positive experience the following day.

2023 The Kansas City Star.

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Kansas City homeless program could be model for mental illness treatment, advocates say (2023, June 5) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-06-kansas-city-homeless-mental-illness.html>

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