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## Ramsey County closes 50-mat overnight shelter for the season

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After four months of housing some of the hardest homeless residents to reach, Ramsey County's temporary "Winter Safe Space" closed Saturday. Some officials hope to see the 50-mat emergency overnight shelter return next winter. Others say St. Paul, Ramsey County, housing and human services providers and the state a longer-term strategy for housing downtown St. Paul's homeless.

"It really met the short-term, immediate need in our community," said Ramsey County Board Chair Jim McDonough. "The number of homeless in our community has dramatically risen, and the number of unsheltered is rising also. Getting them into a safe space for that evening, getting them connected to an outreach worker, on all those levels I think it was a great success."

But McDonough acknowledged a long-term solution is needed. "We've got to be nimble, we've got to be responsive," he said. "One of the issues we're seeing is rising rents, rising home prices, and that's pushing some people out that had stable housing." In December, city and county officials opened up space for 50 homeless residents in the former county detox facility, which sits in a lower level of the Ramsey County Government Center East building on Kellogg Boulevard, below the county's human services offices.

Overseen by Catholic Charities workers, the \$400,000 "Winter Safe Space" was not run like a typical drop-in shelter. Instead, with many skyway hours rolled back from a 2 a.m. to midnight closing as a result of recent changes to city ordinances, the temporary shelter was designed as a last resort for the homeless who camped out in the skyway or rode buses and light rail all night. The shelter, which operated from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m., was far from glamorous — visitors slept in mats on the floor — but it provided relief from cold winds. To gain entry, Metro Transit and St. Paul Police officers offered homeless residents referral cards. So did outreach workers from People Incorporated and Radias Health. Some residents were dropped off in squad cars if other sites such as the Union Gospel Mission and the newly expanded Higher Ground St. Paul shelters were full or their doors had closed to new entries for the night.

“In some cases, if a police officer felt someone was unsafe, they would transport them, but it was never meant to be an arrest or a criminalizing act,” said Chris Michel, a senior program manager with Catholic Charities.

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“Our shelters across the board in the region are full,” Michels added. “We didn’t really know what to expect when we were planning the safe space. We definitely had some people who had been drinking, but we didn’t have behavior implications as a result of that. My interpretation is we are trending very closely with the same population we see in the shelters.” Most nights, the Winter Safe Space was full or near capacity. That’s in part because average temperatures for the winter season were at least a few degrees colder than normal. In October 2015, a one-day count overseen by Wilder Research found 1,787 homeless adults and children in Ramsey County, a 14 percent increase from 2012. And rents have only gone up since then. “The Safe Space folks they’re engaging with really reflected a wide variety of people — people who are struggling with mental health, people who are unemployed,” said Dave Katzenmeyer, a program supervisor with People Incorporated. “(Some) people have been experiencing homelessness for a year or longer, and some significantly longer than that, who were not previously on our radar. There’s people who stayed a night or two. There’s people who were ongoing.” Outreach workers from People Incorporated and Radia Health stopped by twice a week about 6 a.m. to work one-on-one with individuals in hopes of getting them into a more stable situation.

“Knowing that they would be there made it a lot easier to engage them, and it also made it easier to get them to fill out a housing application and do some of those case management-type of things,” Katzenmeyer said. “They also had a drop-in time at the library, as in ‘Meet me at the library in two hours so we can continue to work on what we’ve been working on.’”

Ramsey County contributed \$150,000 to bring the Winter Safe Space — a former detox facility that had mostly been used in recent years for furniture storage — up to building codes. Another \$100,000 helped Catholic Charities with staffing and operational costs. The city of St. Paul contributed an additional \$100,000, and the St. Paul and Minnesota Community Foundations contributed \$50,000. The county remains active in Outside/In, a collaborative effort to get unsheltered homeless residents into shelters for the night, and RUSH, an initiative aimed at helping longtime shelter users find housing. It’s unclear if the Winter Safe Space will return. “We purposefully made it temporary, so we would hold our own feet to the fire,” said St. Paul City Council member Rebecca Noecker, who represents downtown. “If we don’t have those long-term solutions in place for next year, I would certainly advocate that we need



Frederick Melo was once sued by a reader for \$2 million but kept on writing. He came to the Pioneer Press in 2005 and brings a testy East Coast attitude to St. Paul beat reporting. He spent nearly six years covering crime in the Dakota County courts before switching focus to the St. Paul mayor's office, city council, and all things neighborhood-related, from the city's churches to its parks and light rail. A resident of Hamline-Midway, he is married to a Frogtown woman. He Tweets with manic intensity at @FrederickMelo. [Follow Frederick Melo @FrederickMelo](#)