

# Drop in homelessness linked to new shelters

## Four downtown sites house 160 people nightly

BY DARAH HANSEN, VANCOUVER SUN JANUARY 22, 2013



A man with his hat out for change sits on the pavement at Georgia and Burrard Monday, January 21, 2013 in Vancouver.

Photograph by: Ian Lindsay, PNG

Two winter shelters operating in the downtown core since early December are behind a dramatic reduction in cases of street homelessness, trespassing, panhandling and open drug use, says the executive director of the Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association.

"Intuitively it makes sense," said Charles Gauthier. "If you can provide people with a roof over their heads and you provide them with three meals a day and the opportunity to interact with health care professionals that can help these people deal with either substance-abuse issues or getting job ready, it really is making a difference."

Gauthier's comments come after the city issued a media release Monday highlighting statistics collected through the DVBIA's downtown "ambassador" program in November and December 2012.

According to the data, open drug use in the downtown area dropped from 33 recorded incidents in November to four the following month; panhandling cases fell from 467 to 309; trespassing cases dropped from 207 to 163; and the number of people found sleeping on the street fell from 276 to 163.

The changes coincide with the Dec. 1 opening of two so-called HEAT shelters at 1210 Seymour and 826 Richards.

The downtown shelters are among four temporary facilities citywide that offer a warm and dry sleeping space, meals and health care to up to 160 people during the coldest six months.

Sean Spear, associate director of RainCity Housing and Support Society, the organization responsible for running the shelters, said the shelters have been full almost since they opened.

"It takes about a day or two for word to get out they've opened and then they are at capacity," Spear said.

Spear said the data collected by the DVBI follows closely with RainCity's own observations of shelter operations so far this year.

Both the city and RainCity staff say they've received only a handful of complaints from neighbours.

In previous years, the shelters drew widespread criticism from residents and business operators who worried about excessive noise, crowds and risks to public health and safety.

Many of those same concerns were voiced again this year by residents living near the Seymour shelter, prompting a public meeting with RainCity staff before the facility opening.

Spear said initial challenges associated with shelter operations when they first opened in 2008 have since been fixed. New procedures allow for clients to reserve a bed, rather than line up outside. The shelters are staffed 24/7, allowing clients access to bathrooms, laundry facilities and meals.

Spear said a public open house at the Seymour shelter last week attracted only a handful of visitors and no major complaints.

"Things have really been quite smooth since we opened up," he said.

Gauthier said the business association has been supportive of the HEAT shelter program since its inception.

"It makes a lot of sense to do this."

[dahansen@vancouversun.com](mailto:dahansen@vancouversun.com)

[Twitter.com/darahhansen](https://twitter.com/darahhansen)

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## Part I: The city and county's take on Madison's day shelter

By *Leah Linscheid*

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*This is Part I in a series looking at where the city and county meet on homeless services.*

Tim sits at a table reading a dog-eared paperback at the daytime warming shelter on the 800 block of East Washington Avenue. He glances occasionally at the congregation of people gathered around an old tube television playing a movie from the '80s, then looks back at his book.

"As long as you aren't drunk, or aren't causing an uproar, they don't give you a hard time here," he says of the shelter's volunteers, who are managed by director Sarah Gillmore [1].

Tim, who asked that his last name not be used, has been a part of Madison's homeless population – a community of individuals nearly 700 strong, according to Ald. Scott Resnick – for five years. During that time, he has been in and out of jail, a place he considers the only sustained roof over his head in years.

In the evenings, Tim camps out at a shelter near the capitol square provided by the Grace Episcopal Church. Since its opening in late November, he spends his days at this temporary shelter on East Washington Avenue, which is affiliated with Porchlight Inc [2].

The shelter, opened and paid for by Dane County, offers much more than last year's, now-closed, daytime warming shelter just a block down the street, said Dane County Executive Joe Parisi's assistant Jeff Kostelic.

"This one's a little different from the other one near [the former Occupy Madison camp], which the city funded, and it didn't really do anything. It was just an empty building with heat," Kostelic said. "[The new shelter] actually provides a short term solution for some of the community's problems."

Beyond offering a warm place to rest during Wisconsin's winter months, the shelter also provides counselors for drug and alcohol issues, advice for individuals looking to expand their job skills, and free daily lunch.

Computers are also set up at the shelter, a resource Tim said is invaluable in the search for employment.

"I'm fairly computer-savvy, and they come in handy when looking for work," he said.

A small portion of the shelter is devoted to children's toys and books. During the holiday season, the large gathering space was decorated with holiday garland and a small

synthetic tree at the front of the room. There is a coat rack at the entrance of the shelter with a sign that reads, "Free Coats!" Shoes are also available, Tim said.

The temporary day shelter was originally set to be located near the east side's Madison Area Technical College campus in a building already owned by the county. Kostelic cited issues including zoning restrictions and neighborhood concerns that discouraged Dane County officials to pursue the location.

Ultimately, they decided upon the East Washington Avenue location and are currently renting a building from the Goodman Foundation for the winter months that includes a courtyard not visible from the street or neighboring properties.

The warming shelter has so far been the source of fewer complaints this year than last winter's daytime shelter and the nearby, original location of the Occupy Madison <sup>[3]</sup> camp, said Jessi Mulhall, spokesperson for the Tenney-Lapham Neighborhood Association.

"Everything seems to be much cooler this year than last year," Mulhall said. "Maybe it was just badly managed last year at the other place, but in this place, it's much more organized and cops aren't stopping there as much."

Madison Police Department Lieutenant Dave McCaw said the neighborhood experienced an increase in calls for service near last winter's shelter. Residents frequently complained about car and house thefts, noise disturbances, public urination, and trespassing.

Kostelic said the only recent complaints regarding the current warming shelter involved littering. And Madison Police Department spokesperson Joel DeSpain said he hasn't heard a single negative word about the place so far.

Despite what appears to be a comfortable set-up with relatively few complaints, the shelter is not without controversy. Alderman Resnick said the county's early conversations about a more permanent version of the shelter did not include Madison city officials.

"The county really went about [this] on their own, without consulting the city," Resnick said of the shelter plans.

Dane County officials set aside \$600,000 for the purchase and renovation of a permanent building after initially deciding on a temporary location at 1439 Wright Street in a building already owned by the city. According to Resnick, the county planned to cover any other start-up, building, and equipment costs, but expected the City of Madison to fund the operating costs of the proposed permanent homeless shelter, a move Mayor Paul Soglin publicly criticized <sup>[4]</sup>. Concerns were also raised over the location for the temporary shelter, and ultimately the county decided to open the temporary warming shelter on East Washington Avenue instead.

After a lengthy conversation between city and county officials, the city offered to fund part of the operating bill for the proposed permanent facility, a number Kostelic pegged at about \$25,000. The current temporary shelter, however, is funded solely by the county.

Kostelic said he was not aware of any tensions between the city and the county regarding a permanent version of East Washington Avenue's shelter, to which officials have yet to assign a location and concrete plans.

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## New, orderly daytime homeless shelter looks a lot different than last year's



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The daytime warming shelter that opened two weeks ago on East Washington Avenue is just across the street and down the block from one that annoyed the neighbors a year ago, but this center feels different from the moment you walk in the door.

Not only does the space itself — walls splashed with brightly colored murals crafted by the last users of the former teen center — seem more cheerful than the vacant car dealer showroom used last year, it is also buzzing with activity instead of just noise.

From the volunteer who greeted people as they walked in and those who dished up a hot lunch, to the volunteers and staff members who met residents of the Tenney-Lapham neighborhood and me Tuesday to take us on a scheduled tour, the warming shelter felt like a place where things are happening.

That's certainly the plan, center director Sarah Gillmore told me. The shelter is being run as a resource and support center that relies on the contributions of the people who are using it to make things work, she said.

The approach seems to be making a big difference in terms of its orderliness.

White boards posted on the wall of the main room list daily and weekly activities that include Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, a men's group, a women's group, a spirituality group, GED classes, and HIV testing. Metro bus tickets? All gone, says a note scribbled on the board.

The activity groups are run by volunteers from the larger Madison community, but day-to-day tasks to keep the center running — from greeters to food service to clean-up — are performed by volunteer users of the center. An advisory council of shelter users gives feedback on operations, and a community justice group discusses how to minimize conflicts.

Having a role in running the operation is important, Gillmore told me.

"The idea of someone being able to contribute their skills is so powerful. We're based on building a sense of empowerment to increase self-worth and make life changes," she said. By being involved with running the center, as well as participating in support groups

and connecting with local service agencies, shelter users make steps toward more stable lives.

The community-based shelter, opened in a year of unprecedented political attention to homelessness in Dane County, is an experiment in the kind of self-determination being agitated for by homeless people and their advocates. Most visibly in Madison, that approach has been exemplified by Occupy Madison, a political protest that has morphed into a controversial, moving tent city for the homeless over a the past year.

The experiment on East Washington Avenue is being conducted as a project of Porchlight, Inc., the local nonprofit that, as the largest provider of homeless services in Dane County, is sometimes targeted for what critics call a traditional, top-down approach.

Porchlight executive director Steve Schooler told me he is excited to be trying the community-based approach, but he also said the model has its pitfalls.

Because of a greater decision-making role by homeless clients, staff members managing facilities on a community-based model may run into obstacles maintaining behavioral standards and appropriate boundaries with clients, Schooler said. Finding people with the right blend of training, experience and personality to finesse the situation is a challenge, he said. "Sarah's doing a great job. I have a lot of confidence in her."

The atmosphere at the warming shelter has remained copacetic, people there told me, because people using it want it to work. Since it opened on Nov. 26, the shelter has been serving an average of 100 people a day, staff members said, but there have been only a couple of instances of open conflict between users, and no police calls so far.

Police Capt. Carl Gloede reported to me that the only police contact so far was the officer who visited the center for a tour and who talked about expectations of behavior.

One reason that so many people have been able to cooperatively use the space so far is that their participation in running it gives them a sense of ownership, staffer Z! Haukeness tells me. "People feel engaged and proud of something they're contributing to. I hear that the word on the street is 'we respect this place and act appropriately.'"

People genuinely want to be part of running the shelter and are willing to donate their labor to do it, said Nate Abrams, a formerly homeless man on staff at the warming shelter. "We ask for volunteers to clean up, and people readily come up and clean the facility."

Part of the lack of incidents in the neighborhood surrounding the warming shelter — which last year included fighting, public urination and day shelter users wandering the neighborhood while drinking — might be because of homeless volunteers who patrol the neighborhood.

Volunteer Edward F. Allen Jr. said he can tell who is going to be able to follow the rules and who is going to have trouble. He lets them know, he says, that any disruptive behavior that risks safety or disturbs neighbors won't be tolerated. "The community had a problem with our being here," Allen says about last year's shelter. "So I tell them, 'You are not going to cost us this place.'"



The center does not turn down people who are under the influence — as long as their behavior is not out of control — but no drugs or alcohol are allowed on the premises, staffers tell me.

While the warming shelter has been an orderly enterprise so far, that doesn't mean that there haven't been glitches in setting up a place where homeless people can use their winter afternoons both recouping from life on the street and making connections to the building blocks of stability.

Take access to computers, for example. Applications for such things as food stamps, jobs, housing — even the ID card that you need for all the above — now are completed online. Yet on the day I visited the shelter, there was only one working computer, and another balky one that kind of worked. That's not enough computers for 100 people.

A local company had promised a generous donation of 10 laptops when the shelter opened, but for some reason they had not yet arrived. I've heard several explanations of why that was so, but what struck me was the ensuing conversation about the issue of resources for the homeless.

It's always a waiting game, said one woman who helped lead a tour of shelter, her frustration evident as she recounted her own experiences of trying to get access to services she needed.

"Homelessness is an onion," Gillmore told me. "There is reason upon reason and layer upon layer. And then you see how the politics and bureaucracy work."

The complexity of homelessness — as well as the bureaucratic and political limitations of remedies — has been the unspoken context in recent months as Madison Mayor Paul Soglin and Dane County Executive Joe Parisi responded to accusations of heartlessness from Occupy Madison with accountings of how much the city and the county spend on services to assist homeless people and keep them in housing in the first place.

Funding at current levels means waiting lists. And each wait threatens to trip up people trying to better their lives — or just get by. No computers means no ID, no job applications, no housing.

Joe Lusson, president of the Tenney-Lapham Neighborhood Association, told me after the tour on Tuesday that he was struck by the complexity of needs. "It sounds like at all levels, from citizens up to our leaders, we don't know what the heck is going on."

Gillmore, a social worker who has been in homelessness services for a decade at the Salvation Army and The Road Home in Dane County, as well as in other cities, agrees that political officials and people not exposed to homelessness don't understand how complicated recovering from it becomes. "If we would listen to people with lived experience, we would spend our money differently," she said.

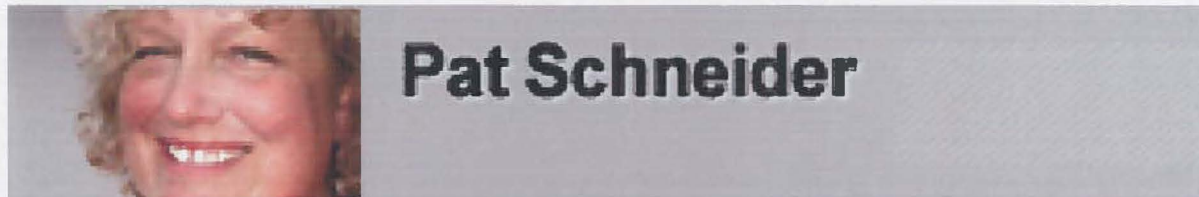
Gillmore made running the day shelter on a community model a condition of taking the job with Porchlight, she told me. Like a lot of other homeless advocates, she'd eventually like to see a permanent one-stop day shelter and resource center.

Ideally such a facility would embrace the "harm-reduction" model of homelessness services, where you deal with people from where they are. If that means someone can't

control his behavior, and you have to ask him to leave for 10 days running, then that's what you do, Gillmore said.

"But if on the 11th day, he is OK, that is the day you say 'let's sit down and get something done.'"

### Pat Schneider



For more than a decade, Pat has reported on the communities — neighborhood, ethnicity, lifestyle and avocation — that make Madison what it is.

