

Partners for Housing's St. Peter shelter adds commons area

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The completed commons area at Partners for Housing's Union Street Place shelter in St. Peter gives guests a place to make meals for their families, congregate and meet with case workers.
Photo courtesy of Partners for Housing

ST. PETER — Months of dedicated work turned what was once a motel garage in St. Peter into a commons area for guests staying at Union Street Place shelter.

A local ministry donated what was at the time the St. Peter Motel to Partners for Housing in 2018, prompting the nonprofit to start renovations to transform it into shelter space. The shelter got up and running the next year, but there was limited room for guests to make and store food.

The recently completed commons area project was an answer to their needs, said Jen Theneman, executive director at Partners for Housing.

“This was the vision, to change it from the motel model to more of a family-friendly environment,” she said.

The shelter has 14 households occupying rooms. Each room has a small microwave and a dorm-size refrigerator.

For staying a night or two, a microwave and mini-fridge could work. Average stays are closer to two months, though, which made the setup hard on families who wanted to make healthy meals.

There was and is a small residential kitchen on the property. Sharing it between as many as 15 households — the shelter’s capacity — wasn’t easy.

“We knew it wouldn’t be enough for all the households,” Theneman said.

The new commons area gives guests more space for meals, congregating outside their rooms and laundry. It’s also used for case management, as the previous setup of meeting in guest rooms could get cramped.

As with previous upgrades at the property, community support played a vital role in seeing the project through. Theneman credited MEI-Total Elevator Solutions and its workers for managing the project from beginning to end.



Workers from MEI-Total Elevator Solutions stand in what was previously a garage at Partners for Affordable Housing's Union Street Place shelter in St. Peter. A project to turn the garage into a commons area for shelter guests was in progress at the time. MEI provided workers between January and August to complete the commons area. Photo courtesy of Partners for Housing

The Mankato business diverted a portion of its workforce to the project. About 25 employees put more than 300 combined hours into renovating the space between January and August, said Coralyn Musser, MEI's director of outreach and engagement.

As a board member at Partners, Musser knows the nonprofit well. Her colleagues already did, too, with the company previously doing a day of service to paint the interior and exterior and work on landscaping.

The day of service turned into months of service when MEI's leadership found out the nonprofit hoped to add a commons area, Musser said.

"This was about not just being a financial backer of nonprofits doing great things, but getting our employees out and helping and seeing the needs in our communities," she said.

The MEI team worked with local contractors to construct walls and install new wiring, plumbing and heating. Mankato's Timeless Interiors and Bellissimo Paint and Coatings stepped in for painting and interior design, while Rickway Carpet, of North Mankato, handled the flooring.

To see it all finished, as well as the reactions from people, was rewarding for the team, Musser said.

"We're just really excited to see the project come full circle," she said.

The commons area has been getting plenty of use since the project finished. Theneman described it as the "most beautiful space" Partners for Housing has at any of its locations.

It's what the guests needed, she added, a place outside their rooms to spend time, cook meals and work with case managers to find housing.

“They deserve a nice space too, and it’s really a blessing to give them such a beautiful one,” she said.

Union Street Place also recently received a swing set, playhouse and sandbox donated by three local churches. Another group donated a tub of soccer balls plus funding for the nonprofit to buy more recreational supplies for children staying at the shelter.

Theneman also noted the nonprofit receives donated food through the Southern Minnesota Food Recovery Project, while community members have taken the initiative to drop off meals for guests.

All the support helped get the property closer to the vision Theneman and the nonprofit had for it when the nonprofit received the property.

“The remodel and the addition of the outdoor space has really enabled us to do that.”

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