

Counterpoint: Outstate, the homeless crisis is lack of shelters

We agree that we need to invest in affordable housing and housing assistance, but shelters save lives.

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The commentary “All policy levers must be used to meet needs” ([June 25](https://www.startribune.com/all-policy-levers-must-be-used-to-meet-homelessness-crisis/571473132/) (<https://www.startribune.com/all-policy-levers-must-be-used-to-meet-homelessness-crisis/571473132/>)) did a great job of highlighting the need for more affordable housing. It’s vitally important to pass a bonding bill that invests in affordable housing and housing assistance. However, there was a critical piece missing in the article: homeless shelters.

We need housing to end homelessness. We also need more shelters to save the lives of those struggling to survive outside. We are calling on the Legislature to provide \$25 million in bonding dollars to preserve and expand homeless shelters across the state of Minnesota.

We need to see homeless shelters as temporary housing for individuals and families until they move into permanent homes. Without state support, saving lives and ending homelessness is not a real possibility.

Throughout greater Minnesota, many individuals and families experiencing homelessness do not have access to a homeless shelter in their county of residence. This forces Minnesotans to find shelter in vehicles, tents and fish houses, doubled-up where they are highly vulnerable to exploitation, or walking in 24-hour stores all night to keep warm and safe.

With various regions seeing an increase in the number of people who are unsheltered since the COVID-19 crisis began, the need for expanded shelter has never been more important.

Bonding for shelter is crucial for projects across the entire state. In the metro area, Simpson Housing Services is working to create a modern and dignified shelter, intentionally designed to meet the short-term housing needs of their guests. Participants will work with staff, overcome barriers, and achieve improved housing placement outcomes. And while Minneapolis would benefit from a project such as this to provide shelter beds and permanent housing, we need to realize that homeless shelters don’t look the same in every part of the state.

For example, Bill’s House in Virginia looks like any other house in the neighborhood, Partners for Affordable Housing in St. Peter bought a motel, and Servants of Shelter in International Falls uses apartments. Many other communities use places of worship as temporary shelters. We need to make sure different parts of the state have adequate funding for what is needed in their communities.

We know local communities will step up. We have seen this through the diverse partnerships of local government, nonprofit organizations and faith communities that have come together to advocate for community solutions. Throughout Minnesota, communities are ready to create more shelter beds but lack the capital funding to start their projects.

Little Falls partnered with a local nonprofit Oasis Central Minnesota to provide shelter for those experiencing homelessness in motels. However, less than half of those who needed shelter were able to be provided with a motel stay primarily due to no vacancy



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Tent encampments are a stopgap to a housing solution.

at the motel or lack of funding from local sources. The community has come together to develop a plan to buy an unused medical facility to convert into a shelter. However, without state support this transition will not be possible.

Rochester temporarily repurposed its civic center and library for a day shelter when other public spaces were closed. Rochester needs investments and a longer term solution.

CHUM, a shelter in Duluth, reports that the number of unsheltered people experiencing homelessness has risen 18% since the pandemic began. City staff worked with St. Louis County and CHUM to secure funding for a prevention shelter during COVID-19. This paid for individual rooms for people at high-risk for COVID-19 due to age and/or underlying health issues. The number of people utilizing this prevention shelter nearly doubled recently, further proving the need for safe shelter.

Among Minnesota's 87 counties, 80 lack enough shelter beds to meet the local needs of individuals experiencing homelessness. We need the Legislature to approve \$25 million in bonding for shelter. While we agree with the earlier opinion piece, we need investments in homeless shelters as part of the housing continuum so we can "seize this opportunity to secure the housing funding that's needed to get people into stable housing. It's about time we addressed homelessness like the emergency it is and always has been."

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