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IMMIGRATION

A temporary migrant shelter will open in Portage Park. Residents have strong feelings.

By Ilana Arougheti

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The former St. Bartholomew Catholic School at 4910 W. Addison St. in Chicago on Dec. 19, 2023. There are plans for a temporary migrant shelter in the school building. (Antonio Perez/Chicago Tribune)

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As Chicago prepares for another [influx of migrants](#) over the holidays, Portage Park residents reacted Monday night to plans for a temporary migrant shelter opening next month in a local church building.

The temporary shelter will open in the former St. Bartholomew Catholic School building at 4910 W. Addison St. The school closed earlier this year.

An agreement to open the shelter at St. Bartholomew has not been finalized. Still, the space will open by mid-January, said Beatriz Ponce de León, the city's deputy mayor of immigrant, migrant and refugee rights. It will stay open for at least six months.

[[What to know about Chicago's migrant crisis](#)]

The shelter will house families of young children, with capacity for 300 to 350 people. Residents will pass through a metal detector on their way in and out. The shelter will have an 11 p.m. curfew, with exceptions for work.

“It is imperative that we don’t leave these families, often with very young and small children, stranded on the street,” 30th Ward Ald. Ruth Cruz said Monday night. “However, we also have a duty to ensure the safety and well-being of our existing residents.”

As elsewhere, the city plans to enroll arriving migrant children in Chicago Public Schools, focusing on schools with English language learning programs.



The former Catholic school would be the first city-sponsored migrant shelter housed in a church. Other temporary shelter spaces have included motels, office spaces and retrofitted warehouses.

The Portage Park building came into play after the Archdiocese of Chicago contacted parishes about unused space.

Though migrant shelters are new to Portage Park, they’re not new to the 16th Police District. Local officers would be assigned to pay special attention to the shelter while on patrol, as they do for schools and parks, said 16th District Cmdr. Heather Daniels.

[[Authorities investigate death of 5-year-old migrant boy as pastor says parents remain devastated](#)]

About 24,000 migrants have arrived in Chicago on 604 buses since August 2022. There are currently more than 14,000 people living in 27 temporary shelters, Ponce de León said.

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“The numbers grew so quickly that we were not able to keep up with our shelter system,” Ponce de León said.

About 5,000 children currently live in Chicago migrant shelters, many younger than pre-K age. The city has been opening about one temporary shelter a week, Ponce de León said, and nearly 10,000 migrants have moved to apartments.

Migrants are no longer sleeping in Chicago police stations. About 240 remain housed in airports.

Most recent arrivals lack family connections in Chicago. This makes migrant response particularly challenging for cities such as Chicago to coordinate, Ponce de León said.

“Cities have not traditionally been the ones to have to integrate so many people,” Ponce de León said. “No city was prepared.”

At Monday’s meeting, tempers flared on both sides as Portage Park residents clashed on the shelter.

Reflecting on his parents’ experience immigrating to Chicago in the 1960s, resident David Canario challenged the city to create safer spaces for migrants, starting with the new shelter.

“I consider every single one of these asylum-seekers to be my family, my cousins, my brothers and sisters,” Canario said. “I hope we have the room for them. I hope we have the resources for them.”

One resident, Suzy Jackson, said working with a migrant family as a volunteer made her more excited to welcome others to Portage Park.

“Their story is a snapshot of so many other families,” Jackson said. “They endured a long and dangerous journey to get here. ... They want to be productive members of our community. Every day is a new challenge for them.”

Others expressed concern the city is taking away money from other causes to accommodate migrants.

Portage Park resident Judy Charnota said Monday that she would rather see the city fund programs for homeless veterans than open migrant shelters. Charnota called for the city to reroute arriving migrants to other states.

“Send (migrants) to Washington, and put them on the White House lawn,”

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Charnota said.

Some neighborhoods with new temporary shelters have faced issues with loitering and littering, Ponce de León said. For resident Nathalie Magallanes, the issue is financial.

Magallanes said once she learned how much money the city is paying contractors to operate shelters — most notably, national employment firm [Favorite Healthcare Staffing](#) — she was less than thrilled about the choice to open more.

The city has [paid](#) Favorite Staffing at least \$56 million since September 2022. In October, the firm signed its third contract extension with the city, for \$40 million through October 2024.

“I’m OK with housing migrants here,” Magallanes said. “I’m a migrant myself. My parents are. But I’m not OK with being screwed out of my taxpayer money.”

City officials emphasized Monday that the shelter will not, however, divert funding from city homeless shelters. If anything, Ponce de León said, organizing migrant shelters has taught the city its programming for unhoused residents is “not adequate.”

“This has taught us that we can do better,” Ponce de León said.

Resident Teresa Groat said she engages with both migrants and homeless residents while working at the Harold Washington Library. On Monday, she appealed to her neighbors to hold empathy for both groups.

“You’re talking about the same coin with two sides,” Groat said. “One does not have to be sacrificed.”

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