

LOCAL

'Tiny house' indoor village for the homeless opens March 8 in Minneapolis

"Tiny house" indoor village opens in March for 100 homeless Minnesotans

By Kelly Smith (<https://www.startribune.com/kelly-smith/6370508/>) Star Tribune |

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Scores of homeless Minnesotans used to sleeping in cars, on couches or in tents will have a new safe place to stay this spring.

Minneapolis nonprofit Avivo is opening an indoor "village" with "tiny houses" in March, providing a COVID-safe and secure place for 100 adults. The two-year pilot program, called Avivo Village, could become a post-pandemic template for private emergency shelters in place of the usual congregate sleeping spaces.

"We're hoping this is a model that will bring more people indoors," said Emily Bastian, Avivo's vice president of chemical and mental health. "I think something like this can be replicated."

GALLERY  GRID

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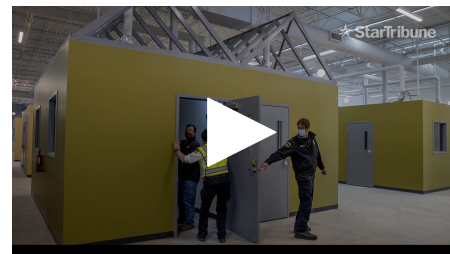


ELIZABETH FLORES, STAR TRIBUNE

 Gallery: The Minneapolis Fire Inspectors made their way through tiny homes to make sure the fire alarms are working, Friday, February 19, 2021 in Minneapolis.

The village will be set up inside an empty book publishing warehouse in the North Loop, where crews are wrapping up the final touches of the publicly funded project before most of the residents move in March 8 (16 arrived in December). The 70-square-foot rooms each offer a bed, closet and small furnishings. The facility is for adults who aren't living in shelters and are referred by street outreach workers.

The pandemic has forced homeless shelters across Minnesota to rework (<https://www.startribune.com/hundreds-of-homeless-minnesotans-move-to-area-hotels-as-officials-race-to-prevent-coronavirus-from-spreading-in-shelters/570183632/>) how they operate to prevent outbreaks. Instead of large shelter rooms with cots squeezed together, organizations have modified arrangements to distance residents and have converted overnight-only facilities to 24/7 ones. Counties have contracted with hotels to lease rooms for the homeless, especially those most at risk of coronavirus complications.



 Video (01:19) : A Minneapolis nonprofit is opening an indoor "village" with "tiny houses" in March for 100 adults. | Star Tribune

In Minneapolis and St. Paul, large-scale [homeless encampments](https://www.startribune.com/coronavirus-fears-push-more-area-homeless-to-the-streets/569580842/) (<https://www.startribune.com/coronavirus-fears-push-more-area-homeless-to-the-streets/569580842/>) have emerged at parks, where more space allowed people to feel safer in the pandemic. As a result, homelessness has become increasingly visible — but has also sparked new collaboration and funding.

Besides Avivo Village, Hennepin County is funding a new [women-only homeless shelter](https://www.startribune.com/former-minneapolis-orphanage-becomes-homeless-women-s-shelter/600011231/) (<https://www.startribune.com/former-minneapolis-orphanage-becomes-homeless-women-s-shelter/600011231/>) and a culturally specific shelter with the American Indian Community Development Corp., both in Minneapolis.

"We have the largest and most intensive shelter system that Hennepin County has ever seen right now," David Hewitt, director of the county's Office to End Homelessness. "The Avivo Village will build on that."

Reworking shelter system

Pre-pandemic, the county had about 900 beds in nearly all overnight-only shelters with congregate settings. Now Hennepin County has about 1,100 beds in 24/7 shelters, with more space between beds, boosting the ratio of case managers to residents — resulting in perhaps more effective service, as well as what could be long-lasting changes.

"I believe that we will come out on the other side of the pandemic with a system that has been transformed, and transformed in ways that will better meet the health and housing needs of people experiencing homelessness," Hewitt said.

Hennepin County is covering the full costs of Avivo Village's construction, which is \$2.2 million. Another \$4 million from the state and the city of Minneapolis funds operations. Services such as mental health care, costing another \$2 million a year, are privately funded.

Most of the county's new funding for homelessness programs is from the federal CARES Act. Avivo Village received funding in October, and by November construction had begun — an unusually quick response.

"We have always believed that, if we're bringing online new shelter sites, we should bring online different kinds of shelter sites that will better serve people who are perhaps not being as well-served as they need to be in the current system," Hewitt said.

Inside the warehouse, pods of the mini-rooms create a sort of pop-up apartment building. Each adult will have their own room, giving them personal space like they would have in a house. The building has shared showers and bathrooms, free meals and a common space for meditation, movies and meetings. It's open around the clock, protected by security and pet-friendly.

Walls are painted four colors to represent an American Indian medicine wheel. Avivo is partnering with the White Earth Nation because Native Americans are disproportionately affected by homelessness. In December, 14 of the first 16 clients who moved into Avivo Village were Native American.

But it's not just a place for someone to lay their head. Avivo has a case manager and therapist on-site to connect clients to permanent housing and mental and chemical health care. Most residents will likely stay 45 to 60 days, and seeing how many of them land a stable home will provide proof of the pilot program's success, Hewitt said.

"Shelters need to play that critical role of being a place that people can stay safely and feel supported, but supported to get out into housing," he added. "Housing is what ends homelessness, not shelters."

Kelly Smith covers nonprofits/philanthropy for the Star Tribune and is based in Minneapolis. Since 2010, she's covered Greater Minnesota on the state/region team, Hennepin County government, west metro suburban government and west metro K-12 education.

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