

NINA MOINI: North Minneapolis is getting a new space for youth experiencing homelessness. Twin Cities organization Avenues for Youth is celebrating the site's grand opening this afternoon. It includes shelter space, emergency beds, and apartments. It will also be the head offices of Avenue staff, like executive director Katherine Meerse, who's on the line with us now. Thanks very much for your time today, Katherine.

KATHERINE MEERSE: Thank you, Nina, so much for having me on.

NINA MOINI: What an exciting day. Congratulations. I understand your previous building had a really long history, but it wasn't really working the way you maybe needed it anymore. Would you tell us to what led you to open this new site?

KATHERINE MEERSE: Sure, yes. Our previous building was built in 1934, and it has a long and storied history. It was a sheltering home for Jewish orphans. It was the headquarters of the Minnesota Black Panther Party. It was an underground nightclub.

NINA MOINI: Wow.

KATHERINE MEERSE: It was many different things over the years. It's very cool. But it was not really built to be a shelter and transitional housing program and home to 20 young people every night. And so, we have young people sleeping two and three to a bedroom. We have 17 young people who share two bathrooms. We have to mix our administrative office space and our shelter space, so there's a youth bathroom across the hall from my office and a bedroom around the corner from my office. And as much as I love to hear them sing in the shower, they don't so much love to hear me take meetings like this.

So we are very, very excited by our new building, which is going to provide single bedrooms. It's going to completely separate out our administrative space from our office space. It uses trauma-informed design, which is something I didn't know about until we started building this building. And it has eight apartments for youth who are ready to maybe graduate from one of our other programs, but they need an opportunity to build up a rental history and maybe still have some lighter touch case management supports nearby.

NINA MOINI: Tell me a little bit more about what's trauma-informed about it? I see here there are 20 shelter beds. There are two emergency beds, instead of one. You mentioned eight new affordable apartments. But how are you rethinking the design to better meet everyone's needs?

KATHERINE MEERSE: Yes, so, many young people who have experienced homelessness have also experienced trauma. And they come to us needing to be able to recover from that trauma and deal with mental health and mental wellbeing. And trauma-informed design is building buildings that are specifically designed to help people do that. So, some of the elements of trauma-informed design include always being able to see outside, so that you don't feel trapped. You can always see out a window or a door. You know how to get out of a building, but also feeling safe and secure.

So, all of our youth bedrooms and apartments are on the second or third floor of the building. No one is on the ground floor. It also includes things like lots of natural light, soothing colors in the furniture, in the paint, not having glaring fluorescent lights, softer lighting. Those are the kinds of things that help, really, with mental health and wellness.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. When you think about just the great need, it's wonderful to have these eight apartments and these beds. How do you select who will be able to take part?

KATHERINE MEERSE: Right. So, youth find us in a number of ways, most importantly through Hennepin County's shelter hotline. And the shelter hotline is a wonderful thing. Anyone 18 and older can call the shelter hotline. We also have a separate hotline for youth under the age of 18. And it is staffed by folks who are experts at shelter diversion.

So, the first thing they do is have a conversation with anyone who calls to figure out, is there any other option for them? Are they behind on their rent, and they're about to be evicted? We may be able to provide some-- the county and their partners may be able to provide some emergency rental assistance. Is this a family conflict that the young person is experiencing? And are they and their family open to some family strengthening services?

And these kind of things are important because every night in Minnesota, there are almost 5,000 young people experiencing homelessness on their own. And we do not have enough shelter and housing for all of them. So, we really are trying to prioritize the limited shelter beds to the people who truly have no other choice.

And if, after calling that shelter hotline, they determine there really is no other option, then the folks at the shelter hotline can refer to any organization that supports youth experiencing homelessness that has an open bed, including Avenues for Youth. So that's the most important way that young people are finding us.

NINA MOINI: What else do you want people to understand about the youth you work with and the obstacles that they can face to find housing? And I understand you're defining youth as 16 to 24? Or what is the range?

KATHERINE MEERSE: Yes, that's correct. We have multiple programs at Avenues. One of the things I like people to understand-- pun intended-- is there's no one avenue that works for every young person, right? Young people who are experiencing homelessness are in Minnesota. You see a lot of disparities, as you do around the country. So, youth who are Black, Indigenous, and youth of color are very much overrepresented in the population of youth experiencing homelessness, and as our youth who identify as LGBTQ+.

So we really try to provide culturally responsive programming and services. So, in addition to our 20-bed shelter and transitional housing program here in North Minneapolis, we have a 12-bed shelter and transitional housing program in Brooklyn Park. We're the only shelter in the northwest suburbs of Hennepin County for young people. We also offer programs where youth are living in apartments. And we are able to provide rental subsidies that they can pick an apartment in a community that makes the most sense for them and their children.

This is a program specifically for youth with children of their own. And where their kids are going to school or where they are going to school or close to their job, it allows them that flexibility. And then we provide rental subsidies. And for all of the youth in all of our programs, we provide a lot of wraparound supports and services-- case management, mental health, physical health. And our goal for all of our young people is that when they leave us, they're able to move into their own stable housing.

NINA MOINI: Katherine, I don't have to tell you that there are simply-- there's not enough room for all the people who need shelters and support right now. There's a lot of discussion going on in the Twin Cities, as there has been in years. Right now, in St. Paul, they're talking about clearing encampments and where will people go, where will those people go. From your perspective, what is it going to take to have more successes like this, like this that you all have built, and to make sure that people are getting access to shelter when they need it?

KATHERINE MEERSE: Yeah, Nina, you're absolutely right. The question of closing encampments, the math just doesn't add up. The city of St. Paul is standing up more shelter beds, but not as many as they're going to need for the folks who are going to have no place to go when the encampments are closed. And I think that what we have to just keep on doing is really engaging in robust public-private partnerships to ensure that we are creating enough housing, enough affordable housing, and enough shelter and transitional housing and all of the services that people experiencing homelessness need.

Our building is very much the result of a public-private partnership. We have federal, state, county, and city funding. And we have had strong, strong support from corporations, foundations, and individuals. And it's been wonderful to see the community come together for this building. And we need to keep on coming together until we've been able to really end homelessness in Minnesota.

NINA MOINI: And just lastly, Katherine, when will staff, all of you move into your offices? And when will youth begin to settle in?

KATHERINE MEERSE: I am speaking to you from the offices right now.

NINA MOINI: Hey!

KATHERINE MEERSE: I moved in last week. We're very excited. And youth will move in the week after next. We thought we should be in the building for a little while, make sure we've got all the bugs out before we move the youth in.

NINA MOINI: OK, and your grand opening beginning at 4:00 today with an open house from 5:00 to 7:00. Congratulations, Katherine. Thank you for joining us.

KATHERINE MEERSE: Thank you so much, Nina.

NINA MOINI: Katherine Meerse is executive director of Avenues for Youth.