

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KELLY GORDON: This is *Minnesota Now*. I'm Kelly Gordon, sitting in today for Nina Moini. The clock is ticking for people living at a large encampment in Pig's Eye Park in St. Paul. The city plans to clear the site on Wednesday. Advocates have been working to connect people living there with shelter and other services ahead of the closure, though they say there still aren't enough places for everyone to go.

Outreach workers from the Union Gospel Mission Twin Cities have been at the encampment almost every day since the clearing announcement was made. Community Relations Director Sarah Peterka joins me now to talk about how they're planning for what's next. Thanks for being here, Sarah.

SARAH PETERKA: Thanks for having me, Kelly.

KELLY GORDON: Yeah. As I mentioned, so folks from your organization, the Union Gospel Mission, have been visiting this park nearly every day. So what does that outreach look like at the encampment?

SARAH PETERKA: Yeah, actually, our chaplains and our outreach team, we've been visiting Pig's Eye Park for a couple years now, building relationships. And we've increased it once the encampment closure was announced. And we bring resources. We bring some water. We'll bring some tents or some sleeping bags, some clothing, meal kits, maybe some bag lunches. We try and bring whatever resources folks are in need of out there right at that time.

And then we just talk with folks. We share about what we can offer at Union Gospel Mission Twin Cities. We just continue to encourage folks who are ready to come into shelter to come with us. And we just, again, build trust and want that trusted relationship.

KELLY GORDON: How many people are there on an average day, would you estimate?

SARAH PETERKA: From our team, it's about one or two different folks come. And we rotate through our chaplain department. Our director of chaplain and outreach, Sammy Watkins, is normally there every visit that we go.

KELLY GORDON: Sure. How many people are living there? I should have been more clear.

SARAH PETERKA: Oh, sorry.

KELLY GORDON: --my question. Yeah, that's OK.

SARAH PETERKA: Yeah. I think last I heard, it was close to 150 to 200 folks who are there.

KELLY GORDON: And you said that a big part of your outreach is to build that trust. So can you explain a little bit why that relationship building is so important, especially when you're trying to get someone to accept services or maybe they're going to be leaving where they've been living?

SARAH PETERKA: Yeah, exactly. Those trusted relationships are important when you're asking someone who has been living in an encampment for possibly several months, maybe several years, because they may not trust you. They may have bad experiences at shelters in their past. They may not just trust anyone who is coming in from an organization who said, we can help.

And so if you just meet them where they're at and get to know the people and share their own frustrations and share what we can help with, I think that is the basis of how we'll get anyone to come back into shelter. Shelter adversity is huge with folks who are living in encampments because they may have had a really bad experience at a shelter. And that's probably the last place they want to go.

KELLY GORDON: Right. I mean, a big part of this, of course, is that some people don't want to enter the shelters, even if a bed is available. What are the reasons that you hear? And how do you respond to that?

SARAH PETERKA: Yeah, there's still a lot of people who want to continue using. Union Gospel Mission Twin Cities is a no-use campus. We would ask people to be sober if they came into our facility. There are folks who have animals. There are folks who have a partner who they don't want to separate from if they go into a specific men's shelter, which is what we have. And then there are folks who are just really distrustful of shelters.

KELLY GORDON: Mm-hm. What have you been hearing from people who are living there as this August 5th deadline looms? How are they feeling?

SARAH PETERKA: They're concerned. They want to be left to be. They're concerned about what's going to happen. They're concerned about where they're supposed to go. They are wanting to be heard and be listened to. And they want folks to hear their stories.

KELLY GORDON: Yeah. Obviously, the Union Gospel Mission is one place. How much shelter space do you have to take in people from St. Paul?

SARAH PETERKA: So our men's campus, which is where we do all of our emergency, for men only, unfortunately, we usually have about 208 beds available. And we are running at an 88% capacity. So on any given night, we only have about 20 to 25 beds available.

KELLY GORDON: OK. And so I'm just doing the quick math here in my head. If there's 150, 200 people there, are there even going to be enough beds between you and other places that can accept people after Wednesday? Where will they go?

SARAH PETERKA: Yeah, I hope so. I know that other service providers are making additional beds available. We have a contingency plan if we end up filling those emergency beds with folks from Pig's Eye. And if we have to make that contingency plan happen, we will do that. But again, we want to just make sure that our doors are open for anyone who is in need of coming.

KELLY GORDON: I know that in some of the stories where people who've been living in the encampment are talked to, they will say, they're going to clear out this space. We're just going to move to a different one. What would you say to that?

SARAH And those are the folks I get worried about the most because those are folks who really don't want to come into shelter. And from what I have been hearing, that's not going to be an option. They are not going to allow folks to move to another space, outside at least. And so we hope that folks will take our invitation or take other service providers' invitation to come in and get some basic needs met and have a safe place to lay their head that night.

PETERKA:

KELLY It's a tricky situation. I mean, do you have ways that you're trying to address this cycle so that you can-- like the people who don't want to necessarily go into shelter, but you're saying you really aren't going to have many other options here, what do you do?

GORDON:

SARAH And that comes down back to that trusted relationship that we've been building with these folks for several months and almost several years, if folks have been there that long. And I think that once we gain their trust and share exactly all of the wraparound services that UGMTC offers, there are folks who will come into our shelter. And we hope that the other service providers who will be there on Wednesday with us will continue to have those open doors and open arms to allow folks to come in just where they are and let them experience shelter in a positive way.

PETERKA:

KELLY Right. I'm curious if you or other organizations have noticed any changes to the broader challenges of homelessness in St. Paul or Minneapolis recently?

GORDON:

SARAH Yeah, we've continued to see an increase in folks visiting our men's campus for our three free meals a day, every day of the week. And we've had an increase in intake calls for our women's and children's shelter, Naomi Family Program.

PETERKA:

So we have seen just an increase in general, information gathering for folks, because there are folks who are on the verge of homelessness that we'll hear from and want to know where they can go and get help if they do become homeless. And it's continuing to be a big challenge. And we are just in the middle of a huge renovation at our men's campus, which gave us a net 70 gain of emergency beds. And again, we're full. And we will be full for some time now.

KELLY Do you think that this is because of times being so hard, the economic difficulties? Or is it even partly just the weather, with people having to say, OK, it is just too hot, I have to do something else? Is it more just this bigger trend of people feeling unsettled?

GORDON:

SARAH I think people are feeling unsettled. I think the economy is something that has to do with it, inflation. Everything is quite expensive at the moment. And if you have a mom with some kiddos having to make a decision between food on the table or rent, that's a tough decision to have to make. Or if it's prescription drugs for someone who's a little older and making their rent payment, which are they going to choose?

PETERKA:

So I think that's a huge thing. And it is just really hot lately. And we see an uptick in folks needing to visit our shelter when it's super duper hot and when it's super duper cold. Minnesota has those two polarities right there of we have a couple months of really nice weather, but we've been in that really hot space for a while as well.

KELLY Right, which is pretty dangerous. Sarah, thanks so much for joining us today. I really appreciate it.

GORDON:

SARAH Thank you.

PETERKA:

KELLY
GORDON:

That was Sarah Peterka, Community Relations Director with the Union Gospel Mission Twin Cities.