



Department of Planning & Community & Economic Development

Community Development Division

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Child Care
Community Resources
Community Development Block Grant

Memo

To: All Alders, Mayor Rhodes-Conway

From: Jim O'Keefe

Date: March 10, 2026

Re: Update on New Men's Shelter

I am writing to update you about the approaching opening of the new men's shelter.

This City-owned facility is located on Madison's east side, at 1904 Bartillon Drive. The \$25+ million project was financed with funds from City, County and Federal sources. Its design and construction were managed by the City's Engineering Department. (Kudos to Bryan Cooper, Jon Evans, Maria Delestre and their team!)

BUILDING FEATURES

The building incorporates these key features to reduce operating expenses and to address issues highlighted by people with lived experience, shelter staff and others in community engagement sessions:

- A **geothermal system** designed to lessen heating and cooling demands;
- A **solar panel** array to reduce energy costs;
- Capacity to serve 250 people in a setting that replaces the conventional single, large congregate **sleeping space with six smaller pods**;
- **Flexible meeting rooms** where service providers can work with guests;
- Separate spaces for those who, due to mobility, health or behavioral issues, are better served apart from the general population;
- Abundant natural light, secure outdoor areas, full bathroom and shower facilities, security cameras, and **bunks equipped with electrical outlets and secure storage lockers**; and
- A **commercial grade kitchen** in which the operator will prepare meals and provide employment training for shelter guests.

OPENING THE SHELTER

The shelter will open this spring. Construction is substantially complete; installation of furniture and fixtures is proceeding. Porchlight, Inc., the organization chosen to operate the shelter, is beginning to familiarize staff with the building's spaces and systems. Porchlight is also working with City and County staff to develop and install systems and policies integral to the shelter's day-to-day operations. When an opening date is set, we will share it.

Opening details

The shelter will open as an overnight shelter, though the goal remains to operate it 24/7. More on that below.

The shelter budget for 2026 is \$3.5M – somewhat higher than initial estimates. It covers operating costs at both the current site on Zeier Road, and the new location when it opens. City (\$1.5M) and County (\$1.4M) governments are the primary funders, with modest contributions coming from the State and Porchlight’s fundraising. Porchlight’s Board of Directors has approved this budget.

The City’s 2026 contribution was determined in last summer’s Homeless Services RFP process. A corresponding purchase of services contract is finalized. Separately, \$200,000 is budgeted for expenses (utilities and building repairs) not included in Porchlight’s \$3.5M operating budget, bringing the total City outlay to \$1.7M.

City staff are still negotiating a facility agreement with Porchlight that will assign roles and responsibilities regarding the building’s use. It is much more detailed than what has governed previous arrangements for temporary sites.

In authorizing its financial support, the County Board specified its funds will flow through the City. The County will not contract with Porchlight. It also anticipates that the City and County will memorialize their collaborative relationship in an intergovernmental agreement (IGA). These two provisions make necessary the following Council actions:

- **The Council must amend the City’s 2026 Operating Budget to accept County funds and authorize their use.** A resolution detailing this amendment will be prepared in coming weeks.
- **The Council and County Board will need to approve the terms of a City/County IGA.** County staff have prepared an initial draft which is being reviewed by the City Attorney’s Office. A second resolution, seeking this approval, will be presented to the Council.

Changes coming to shelter

The new shelter is not going to end homelessness here, but it can play an important role in achieving our community’s stated goal of making homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring. Neither is the shelter meant to substitute for housing, rather, it will offer a temporary place for unhoused men to stay while they search for housing. If successful, it will shorten lengths of stay and increase the number of people it can serve.

The shelter’s opening will bring these important changes:

- **The shelter will no longer operate as a drop-in shelter** in which people gain entry each night merely by showing up. Instead, a person will get access through a Porchlight-managed registration system and, once registered, retain their access from night to night.
- The new shelter has **capacity to sleep 250 people**. Moreover, its design prevents it from exceeding its capacity as Zeier and other temporary venues routinely did. This means it does not have room to serve everyone currently using the Zeier facility. In determining which current guests will move over, Porchlight will prioritize guests based on person-specific information taken from our local Coordinated Entry system. Prioritization rankings will consider factors like age (65+), medical vulnerability (e.g., dependence on medical equipment) and length of time in shelter, etc. Guests who don’t move to the new shelter will be able to place their names on a waiting list which will be used when openings occur.
- The new shelter will focus on helping guests secure housing. On-site case managers will work with guests to develop individualized housing plans and be available to help implement them. The shelter will not impose a limit on how long a guest may stay but it will require anyone using shelter more than 90 days to be actively

engaged with case management. Thus, **a guest will not have to leave shelter just because he cannot find housing. But he will be asked to leave if he has not found housing after 90 days and chooses not to work with a case manager.**

- This week, Porchlight will provide written notice to current and recent shelter users. It will inform people about the impending move and other coming changes. The goal is to let people know what to expect and give them some time to prepare for the transition. CDD staff will take part in a meeting at the shelter next week to provide more details and answer questions. Soon, Porchlight will begin reaching out to people whose prioritization rankings make them likely candidates to move to the new shelter.

TOWARD A FULL-TIME SHELTER

The ability to connect shelter guests to housing is greatly enhanced if the facility remains open during the day. It provides a space, and the time, for shelter users to work with service providers – neither of which has been available in shelter settings. **But keeping the building open requires resources beyond the \$3.5 million operating budget described earlier.** Initial estimates put the cost of a 24/7 operation at \$4.2M but that number is currently under review and is likely to rise.

This shelter was built for use throughout the day. However, that potential will only be realized if broader financial backing from the community materializes. Local governments have done all they can, the challenge now is to convince non-government sources to participate – just as they do for shelters in communities across the country, and just as they once did here in Madison. **A local group, Shelter Friends of Dane County, is leading private fundraising efforts** and reports good early response. It is pursuing dual goals:

- Solicit donations to establish an endowment that would generate annual contributions toward shelter operations. The City pledged \$2M to that endowment, the first \$1M was conveyed in 2025.
- Raise funds on an annual basis sufficient to cover the added cost of expanded operations. Shelter Friends expects this aspect of its fundraising will diminish as the endowment grows.

TRANSITION

In closing, I want to acknowledge apprehension over the likelihood that some current shelter users will be left out in transitioning to the new facility. Those concerns have prompted calls for an overflow shelter for those not able to be served at Bartillon. Indeed, Dane County's 2026 Budget contains \$440,000 for an overflow shelter and the County is currently soliciting proposals through an RFP process. But the County has not identified a site for this purpose nor the funds to acquire one. And while it is widely presumed the City would make the Zeier property available, its current condition precludes that option unless, or until, needed repairs are made. The extent of those repairs awaits a planned assessment by City Engineering. In short, questions about funding adequacy, site availability and experienced operators make prospects for an overflow shelter implausible in the short term.

It is very difficult to know how many people this transition might displace, or for how long. This is a constantly changing population. Shelter utilization fluctuates – during the span of a year, even day-to-day. In the last week of February alone, nightly shelter counts ranged from 394 to 314. The average night in December saw 340 guests; last May it was 284. And, there is considerable turnover in shelter use – the data shows that half of those that use shelter do so for less than 30 days.

The focus now is on giving people information and time to prepare. Written notifications beginning this week are part of that effort. Porchlight staff, including case managers, continue to work with guests, as do other service providers, to help connect them to available housing resources. Those efforts will continue right up to the date of the move, and beyond.

May 18, 2026

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This is a big deal, and it's happened only because City policy makers, you all, have provided the necessary leadership and commitment. I can't begin to tell you how much those of us involved in the project appreciate your support. Now, we turn our attention from merely making it happen – to the equally challenging task of making it successful. Madison will be better for it.