

# Mayor Ben McAdams posed as a homeless person for 3 days and 2 nights. Here's what he saw.

*Undercover mission gives him firsthand taste of the fear, drug abuse and chaos in SLC's Rio Grande neighborhood.*

*The Salt Lake Tribune, by Courtney Tanner, August 6, 2017*

The first piece of advice he got was “Don’t take off your shoes.” The second, “Don’t go to the bathroom after dark.”

Though Salt Lake County Mayor Ben McAdams heeded both, it didn’t make him feel any less vulnerable. There was little that could as he settled in for a night at the downtown Road Home homeless shelter.

When he climbed into bed — the top of a three-person bunk— with his sneakers still tightly laced to fend off would-be thieves, arguments echoed off the walls. One man had passed out on another’s cot, and McAdams heard the thud of a head smacking the cement floor when the sleeping occupant was yanked off the mattress.

He saw signs of drug use nearby. He wouldn’t say whether it was heroin needles or bags of spice. Both are popular in the blocks surrounding the shelter in Salt Lake City’s Rio Grande district.

It’s not like McAdams didn’t know it would be bad. He’d held news conferences about the so-called crisis in the area. He’d visited the grim neighborhood before. He’d read about the police officers assaulted and the drug dealers hiding out and the homeless people unable to access welfare services.

Experiencing it firsthand was different.

“That was shocking to me.”

## ‘Not a publicity stunt’

McAdams’ stay at The Road Home — what he describes as a fact-finding mission — was part of three days and two nights he spent posing as a homeless person to gather information before recommending a new shelter location. Seeking a more personal perspective, he felt, could better guide future services and plans lacking in the current model. Al Hartmann | The Salt Lake Tribune Salt Lake County Mayor Ben McAdams announces Friday March 31 that the new homeless resource center will be built at 3380 South 10th West in South Salt Lake.

The mayor left the county office building at 5 p.m. on Friday, March 24 with no wallet and no ID. He carried a bag with clothes, his phone and a 5 ft. by 8 ft. blue tarp. And he was accompanied by Patrick Reimherr, the county’s director of government affairs.

The Salt Lake Tribune heard about McAdams’ 72 hours on the street in April and has requested interviews since then. The mayor reluctantly sat down to talk about it this week. Reimherr initially agreed to chat about his experience but later decided against it.

While stressing that the trip was “not a publicity stunt,” McAdams hesitated and declined to answer some specific questions about drug use inside the shelter. The Road Home did not know he’d be staying there.

“I didn’t go as an exposé,” he said.

## **The first night**

McAdams jokes that he “didn’t look like a mayor” when he walked from State Street to the homeless district along 500 West. Wearing jeans and a black sweatshirt — with the hood pulled over his head most of the time as the temperature dipped into the low 40s — no one recognized him. His aim was to fit in and observe.

For the first night, that meant sleeping on the street. He wanted to know why someone might choose the sidewalk over the shelter.

With just their tarp and no blankets, McAdams and Reimherr found a spot to snooze off next to a building on South Temple. Several hundred people, the mayor noted, milled around them on 500 West as it got dark. Another 50 stood outside on Rio Grande Street. Fights broke out frequently.

“I didn’t feel safe,” he said. “I absolutely did not feel safe.”

McAdams described it as a “very chaotic environment” and got about four hours of sleep through it all. Still, some of the folks he talked to said it’s better to be outside and get some space from the drug trade and shooting gallery that inundates the area immediately in front of the shelter doors.

## **A bustling drug market**

The soft patter of rain was broken by the sound of whistles and shouts.

“Black or white?” one man asked.

“Do you need anything?” another inquired.

“Clearly they’re not offering help,” McAdams explained.

The calls — from drug dealers selling cocaine and heroin — got louder as the mayor walked toward The Road Home. For a while, the solicitations came every couple blocks. As he neared the shelter, they came every 10 feet.

Matt Minkevitch, executive director of The Road Home, said drug use is “remarkably prevalent” along the corridor surrounding the shelter. He believes dealers set up shop in the area because out-of-state individuals can easily access it from Interstate 15. The primary buyers, he said, are not homeless individuals.

“If you take the hundreds of people who are staying at the shelter and empty all of their pockets, there’s not going to be a whole lot of money” to buy drugs, he said. That doesn’t mean users don’t end up at the shelter or camp out nearby.

During his shifts, Minkevitch walks around The Road Home’s perimeter to see if anyone is in immediate distress. He calls 911 occasionally to report unconscious individuals, but mostly he sees handfuls of people in a zombie-like, depressed state.

“They are in a daze,” he explained. In the cold winter months, shelter staffers coax those individuals inside — even if they appear to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol — to get them out of the elements and “get them through the night.”

Sometimes, drugs creep inside the shelter. Though Minkevitch said The Road Home’s employees screen individuals with a drug-detection wand, search bags and periodically conduct pat-downs, he acknowledges it’s not an infallible system.

McAdams said his screening consisted of only a bag check.

“It wasn’t thorough,” he recalled. “... It’s possible that substances could get in through that screening process.”

While there has been an increase in “behavioral challenges,” which Minkevitch credits to more widespread use of heroin and spice, incidents of people using drugs in the shelter aren’t incredibly common and don’t represent most of the clientele, he said. For 80 percent of the 8,000 people who visited the shelter last year, he said, it was a one-time, brief episode of homelessness before a quick return to stable housing.

“It’s hard to see that,” he said, “when you’re seeing this repetitive cycle of despair and desperation and just suffering that’s going on with the people who are living on the streets, who are filthy dirty and confused.”

## Eating and sleeping

During his three days experiencing life on the streets, McAdams said his time was consumed by solving two pressing needs: Where am I going to sleep? And where am I going to get food?

“You have to plan your day around that,” he said, realizing that leaves little energy left to search for jobs or housing.

“I have health insurance, I have a family, I have a home. My backstop was a phone call away.” — Ben McAdams

McAdams and Reimherr ate at the Rescue Mission shelter a few times and picked up free sack lunches from the Good Samaritan Program. The two service providers sit slightly more than 13 blocks apart — a walking distance of about two miles. On Sunday morning, the mayor walked to the viaduct under 600 South for a Christian church-sponsored breakfast.

They didn’t end up eating there, but McAdams keeps the styrofoam plate he got in line as a reminder of the trip. It sits on his work desk, with the phrase “Jesus is Lord” written on the back in black marker. When he got home, the mayor donated \$50 to the places he visited to reimburse for services he used.

His efforts to see behind the walls of The Road Home, though, took a little more time than money. McAdams got in line for a bed in the afternoon, but was turned away. He came back again Saturday evening at 6 p.m. and was able to snag a mattress, though he and Reimherr were assigned to different rooms. They were drenched from the rain by the time they got indoors but were too late to get a blanket. At least it was warmer inside, McAdams thought. He lay down immediately, exhausted from walking around in the cold.

“The real victims ... are the homeless.” — Bryson Garbett

Bryson Garbett, a developer and chairman of the Pioneer Park Coalition, an advocacy group for shop owners and residents in the Rio Grande district, complimented McAdams for his shelter stay, suggesting the experience can be helpful for politicians.

“I think that that’s brave and bold of him,” he said.

Garbett did his own stay-over at The Road Home in September 2014. As he waited for a bed, a dealer named “Chewy” passed out balloons stuffed with heroin and cocaine openly in the daylight. He was 15 feet from a children’s playground.

“I had no idea that was going on in Salt Lake,” Garbett said.

He believes the situation has worsened in the nearly three years since he was there — “and I thought it was very depraved then,” Garbett added. He’s grown more afraid of walking near the shelter as the drug trade has exploded and with it violent crimes.

Three people have been killed in homicides in the district in the past two weeks. Over the last year, there have been stabbings, machete attacks and robberies. Salt Lake City police officers heavily patrol the area.

“The real victims of what’s happening down there are the homeless,” Garbett said “... It’s gotten more and more dangerous. And they have no choice of where to go.”

Pamela Atkinson, a longtime homeless advocate, believes it can be hard to grasp all that’s happening near the shelter without witnessing firsthand the conditions that people live in daily. McAdams got just a “glimpse into what it’s like” with his short stay at the shelter, she said.

Living among the disruption, chaos and uncertainty was a “learning experience for him,” Atkinson added.

Minkevitch, too, understands the mayor’s mission. But he discourages others from launching their own “homeless tourism” bids and taking beds from those in need.

“The demand on shelter is so high right now,” Minkevitch said. The Road Home’s capacity is 1,100 people.

## Looking ahead

As he spoke with homeless individuals, listening to their stories and getting their input, McAdams bumped into a small family — a mom, dad and daughter — as they were leaving The Road Home to find beds at the Midvale shelter some 15 miles south. The little girl, nine years old, kept asking where they were going to sleep and what they were going to eat. The parents didn’t know.

“She’s the age of one of my kids,” the mayor said. “It’s heartbreaking to see a young child who’s growing up in those circumstances.”

The encounter reaffirmed for McAdams his top priority: moving families out of the shelter’s harsh environment. That was accomplished July 15. The other recommendation coming out of his experience — to immediately reduce the “intolerable” lawlessness surrounding The Road Home — has been slow moving.

McAdams would like to fence off Rio Grande Street into a courtyard so that homeless individuals are separated from criminal predators. He also hopes to expand behavioral health treatment beds and to relocate the state liquor store away from the area. His new sense of urgency, though, can only go so far, he said. It requires the collaboration of the state, city and law enforcement officials to address the problems and solutions in a meaningful way.

“It does limit what we can do,” he said.

As part of the long-term reform effort, The Road Home will close and three new shelters will open by June 30, 2019. Salt Lake City will host two 200-bed resource centers at 131 E. 700 South and 275 W. High Ave. McAdams selected a third site, 3380 South 1000 West, in South Salt Lake to hold up to 300 beds.

His decision to go with that location came after he visited the five possible spots on Sunday, the last of the days he spent on the streets, by riding TRAX to each one. He believes the new site will transform the shelter experience into one more focused on recovery and rehabilitation for those who need it.

“I know that my three days and two nights is nothing. It was a helpful insight,” McAdams said. “But I knew that if something happened, I have health insurance, I have a family, I have a home. My backstop was a phone call away.”