

A new way to help Seattle's homeless: Navigation Center set to open Wednesday

With Seattle's first 24-hour shelter for the homeless set to open, local officials now have to determine whether it will help reduce homelessness.

The Seattle Times, by Vernal Coleman, Staff Reporter, July 10, 2017, 6:00 am

After a siting controversy and months of delay, Seattle's first enhanced 24-hour shelter for homeless people will open to clients Wednesday.

Inside the newly refurbished facility in the Little Saigon neighborhood are sleeping cots with blue cushions that couples can push together, offices where clients will receive supportive services, and a mess hall for meals.

Staffers at the Navigation Center will spend the next days making last-minute preparations for the opening, said Greg Jensen, a spokesman for the Downtown Emergency Service Center (DESC), which the city has contracted to operate the facility.

About 20 homeless people already have been referred to the center by city outreach workers, Jensen said. "We anticipate that we'll be seeing clients almost immediately," he said.

Mayor Ed Murray put the process to develop the center in motion via a June 2016 executive order, saying that creating a shelter with services beyond those offered at traditional facilities was key to the city's strategy.

But its development was rough going. A plan to open the center by the end of 2016 was scuttled when the city was unable to find a suitable site.

In February, city officials reached an agreement with the Seattle Indian Commission to lease the Pearl Warren building. The move displaced Operation Nightwatch, a mats-on-the-floor-style emergency shelter for homeless men that was leasing space in the building, and stirred up protest among residents of the surrounding community.

Advocates with neighborhood group Friends of Little Saigon continue to push back against the city, saying that the decision to site the center on the edge of the city's Chinatown International District was reached without hearing views from local residents.

Pearl Warren building in Seattle's Chinatown/International District.

"There are many in the community who still don't want it, but we know it's going to open anyway," said Quynh Pham, spokeswoman for Friends of Little Saigon. "At this point, we just want to have the city address concerns about this model and how the center will be run."

City officials are betting that the center, with restrictions on entry eased and intensive services available, will become an asset for moving people indoors and out of conditions that are unsanitary and sometimes unsafe. People living in unauthorized tent encampments will initially be given top priority, officials said.

"It will allow us to reach those who are in the community of homeless people who have not been getting robust services," said DESC director Dan Malone.

Modeled after a similar shelter in San Francisco's Mission District, the center features laundry and storage facilities, showers and enough dormitory space to provide beds to about 75 people.

Unlike more restrictive shelters, clients will be able to store their belongings, bring along their pets and partners, and come and go when they like. While discouraged, drug and alcohol

use inside the facility will be allowed unless it disturbs other clients or the surrounding community.

Once there, people who might have been unwilling or unable to take advantage of other shelter options will be pointed toward mental-health, addiction and housing services based on their needs, officials said.

How successful the center might be in moving people into permanent housing remains an open question. Similar shelters in San Francisco, which is experiencing its own crisis over affordable housing and visible homelessness, may serve as a rough guide.

During its first year of operation, 399 people exited the San Francisco Navigation Center, and just over 140 of them went into permanent housing, according to a June 2016 audit by the San Francisco Controller's Office. Those gaining permanent housing had stayed at the center an average 88 days before leaving, the report shows.

Since opening the original facility in 2015, officials have added a second center and have plans to open several others around the city.

Though not an apples-to-apples comparison, the numbers outpace the performance of many Seattle-area traditional shelters. According to the most recent quarterly assessment, 10 percent of people recorded as leaving local emergency and overnight shelters ended up in permanent housing.

Seattle officials have placed a 60-day cap on how long each client will be allowed to reside in the Navigation Center. Decisions to extend the stays of those whose search for housing takes longer than 60 days will be made on a case-by-case basis, said Meg Olberding, Seattle Human Services Department spokeswoman.

Reckoning with limited housing resources and a difficult rental market may require officials to think more broadly about what makes for a permanent housing solution. For clients leaving the center, that could mean permanent supportive housing programs, but also living with friends or relatives, or in treatment centers or mental-health facilities, Olberding said.

The cost of outfitting the center won't be available for another 60 days, but city officials said the final tally will be within the project's \$2.7 million budget.

Vernal Coleman: 206-464-3304 or vcoleman@seattletimes.com, Twitter @vernalcoleman