

PIP shelter closes; Triage Center opens

TRIAGE CENTER ON QUEEN ST. IN WORCESTER



There was standing room only during the dedication ceremony. (T&G Staff/PAUL KAPTEYN)

By Linda Bock TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF
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The People in Peril Shelter is serving its final clients tonight, closing the doors of the 701 Main St. site known locally for combating homelessness with “three hots and a cot.”

In its place is a \$3.2 million, two-story building at 25 Queen St. that will offer both shelter and support for those in need.

“I do think it's one of the first of its kind,” said Aaron Gornstein, state undersecretary for housing and economic development.

That agency funded \$1.6 million of the 1,300-square-foot building that offers short-term housing for 25 people and 15 units for those preparing for more

independent living.

The PIP shelter had closed in 2011, only to reopen later in the year after problems arose with a temporary triage and assessment center at 12 Queen St.

The triage and assessment approach, now overseen by the South Middlesex Opportunity Council, is designed to swiftly transition the homeless into a coordinated system of supported housing and care.

"This is a model program for the rest of the state," Mr. Gornstein said.

SMOC Executive Director James T. Cuddy called the building, known as the Greater Worcester Housing Connection Triage and Assessment Center, a milestone in the national movement away from warehousing homeless people in emergency shelters.

"Now we have to put our money where our mouths are," Mr. Cuddy said.

Advocates and activists joined city and state officials Tuesday to cut the ceremonial ribbon at the new building.

Once the homeless are relocated, the PIP shelter will be secured and mothballed, according to Jerry Desilets, director of planning for SMOC. He said officials will work with the city on what to do with the four-story building.

Mr. Cuddy thanked City Manager Michael V. O'Brien for his leadership, partnership and the location. "The city manager brought us to these vacant lots."

Though construction was completed in exactly nine months, the process for the project took nearly 10 years, Mr. Cuddy said.

Mr. O'Brien said the vacant lots were once a hotbed of illicit activity, and he hopes the new center will serve as a beacon of hope for the homeless.

"Our mission is to end homelessness in the city," Mr. O'Brien said.

District 4 City Councilor Sarai Rivera thanked the center's new neighbors, including the Chandler Street Business Alliance, for their willingness to allow the center in the neighborhood. Councilor-at-Large Joseph C. O'Brien, representing Mayor Joseph M. Petty, said the road to the new center was rocky and contentious at times. He thanked Lt. Gov. Timothy P. Murray for

his work on finding a solution to ending homelessness.

"We are truly making progress in Worcester," Mr. O'Brien said.

The Rev. Robert Bachelder, president of the Worcester Area Mission Society, said the new center represents nothing less than a paradigm change. He said the long, winding, rocky road leading to the new center shows the capacity of the city and SMOC for innovation.

Before Tuesday's speeches, attendees toured the new building and marveled at how light, clean and airy the building was in comparison to the PIP shelter.

There are separate dorm-like rooms for 25 men and women on the first floor, and 15 single rooms on the second floor for those in the process of moving to more permanent housing. Those residents have a kitchen on the second floor where they can prepare their own meals. Meals will also be served on the first floor.

"This is long overdue," said David Davidowicz, program director for Ready, Willing and Able, SMOC's temporary work agency. "We hire the individuals this building will serve."

Mr. Cuddy acknowledged that there were genuine fears and concerns about the center, given the history of its predecessor.

"It's easy to warehouse people," Mr. Cuddy said, but the new concept will succeed.

"Never seen before — drastically reducing the number of beds," Mr. Cuddy said.

The capacity at the PIP shelter was about 50, somewhat less in the warmer months, according to housing officials.

"We need to prove to every urban setting that this can be done," Mr. Cuddy said.

Country Bank for Savings provided SMOC with loan financing for the project.

"We hope to see more of these in the future," Mr. Gornstein said. "Someone can stay here in dignity."