

Dégagé Ministries to pilot the first housing program in the state specifically for women experiencing chronic homelessness

Complex Care Housing will provide transitional housing and personalized programming for 25 women to shift them to permanent housing

Similar programs across the nation have achieved an 85% success rate

(GRAND RAPIDS, MI) – A team effort has paved the way for Grand Rapids nonprofit Dégagé Ministries to secure funding that will allow it to pilot a program to provide transitional housing for 25 women at the former American Cancer Society Hope Lodge hospitality house, located at 129 Jefferson Avenue in downtown Grand Rapids. Starting mid-January, 25 women experiencing chronic homelessness will take up residence at the Complex Care Housing program that Dégagé will operate. The initiative is believed to be the first in the state to target people with complex needs who struggle to maintain permanent housing.

The female residents who qualify for this program have experienced chronic homelessness for several years and have not stayed successfully housed even when placed in housing. They have significant medical and mental health needs and are high consumers of EMS, police response, emergency room medical care, and crisis mental health care.

Similar programs have been tried in other parts of the country with an 80% to 90% success rate in keeping people housed.

The goal is to transition as many residents as possible to succeed in a permanent housing environment after benefiting from the program's high level of support.

"The women enrolled in the pilot cohort are thrilled to finally find a place to call home where they feel safe, understood, and not judged," said Thelma Ensink, executive director at Dégagé Ministries. "They also acknowledge their need for personalized medical and mental health care, which will be provided in this setting."

The Complex Care Housing program will use the 28,000 SF facility, which is adjacent to the Trinity Health Grand Rapids campus. Trinity Health Grand Rapids, who acquired the property from the American Cancer Society in 2021, is leasing the 20-room facility to Dégagé and has donated all the furniture to the program.

“We are grateful for the opportunity to partner with Dégagé Ministries in their important work to address complex housing needs as we know well the impact that safe, secure housing has on both an individual’s health and on the community as a whole,” said Dr. Matt Biersack, president of Trinity Health Grand Rapids. “Together, we serve many of the most vulnerable within this community, and any ability to impact social determinants of health, like housing, means the potential to improve life expectancy and quality of life. For Trinity Health Grand Rapids, it is an opportunity to live into our faith-based Mission to be a transforming and healing presence in this community.”

The building’s former use as an overnight facility, with suites, common area lounges, activity rooms, and dining facilities, makes it well-suited for its new use. Dégagé is making small modifications to the facility in preparation for a January 16 opening.

“We are so grateful to Dr. Matt Biersack and Trinity Health Grand Rapids for their generosity in helping us repurpose the facility and would not have been able to launch this program without the faithful support of the family foundations and donors who share our vision for addressing chronic homelessness,” said Thelma Ensink. “We are hopeful that after a year under our belt and solid data to support this model, government agencies and other partners will join us in this endeavor.”

Although Dégagé will operate the facility and provide case management, Network180 will offer on-site mental health support, and Catherine’s Health Center will provide general medical services to the residents.

“At Network180, we understand that just as mental health is not separate from physical health, socio-economic factors, like housing insecurity, can have a direct effect on a person’s mental health,” said Bill Ward, executive director of Network180. “When a person comes to us in crisis, we’re able to help treat their mental health needs, but lack of stability in an area like safe housing becomes a barrier to achieving ongoing mental health. Providing people the help they need to build a more solid foundation for their lives is ultimately good for the health and well-being of our community.”

Dégagé’s current senior program director, Julie Kendrick, has been tapped to serve as the Complex Care Housing program director. Dégagé anticipates hiring six additional staff and leveraging current staff for other meal and activity functions.

The project is expected to cost \$750,000 for the first year, all secured through private donations. The DeVos Family Foundation has provided a lead gift, with the Jandernoa Foundation, Frey Foundation, and other private donors joining to launch this innovative program. Program officials anticipate securing more local and state government funding after the pilot year.

Although there are other transitional housing programs in the region, none are specifically programmed to serve the high acuity, complex conditions some individuals experience. Organization officials hope to reduce strain on local ERs and EMT transfers by providing catered programming.

“The women this program serves are those that are often brought to shelters or hospital emergency rooms by police or EMT services as there is no other place to go,” Ensink adds. “One of our goals is to alleviate unnecessary ER visits and police and EMT dispatches by providing the appropriate care and housing environment for women who require special attention.”

Dégagé has identified 55 women who qualify for the referral-based program, of which 25 have already agreed to join. Each participant will pay a monthly fee of \$260. Many women are regular patrons at Dégagé but, due to their complex needs, often find themselves in troubling situations in the congregate-style setting of the facility’s Day Center.

“By housing women who struggle to be in a large group setting, we are not only helping them but also helping to increase capacity at Dégagé Ministries for the unhoused,” said Julie Kendrick, director of the Complex Care Housing program.

When discussing the opportunity to enroll in the program, one Dégagé participant added, “I have hope again. It feels impossible to stay healthy mentally while I am homeless. If I have my own place, I have the best chance to be healthy.”

That hope motivates Ensink to ensure the program works and can be expanded.

“We know this program only touches a small population of those currently identified as being unhoused in greater Grand Rapids, but we hope to demonstrate a solid ROI for funders and realize success in providing innovative, targeted programming that meets people where they are and empowers them to make confident, successful steps into permanent housing,” added Ensink.

If the program is successful, Dégagé hopes to provide similar facilities and programming to additional participants.