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Downtown homeless shelters strengthen collaboration with opening of community center aimed at moving people forward in life

New facility allows Dégagé Ministries and Mel Trotter Ministries to provide essential resources for area's unhoused

(GRAND RAPIDS, MI) – Starting Nov. 4, thanks to a collaboration between Dégagé Ministries and Mel Trotter Ministries, there will be a new facility in the Heartside area of downtown that aims to help the area's unhoused population gain easier access to essential services that can help them move forward in life. Located just north of Dégagé's main campus in a building known as The Vault at 121 Sheldon Avenue, the facility will be able to accommodate 80 men and women to not only have a safe, warm space to rest and eat during the day but also to connect them to Dégagé and Mel Trotter staff who can provide guidance on resources related to employment, housing, and health needs.

The agencies are leasing the building from LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church at a reduced rate for use between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m. each weekday. The church, located across the street, will continue to use the facility for its youth programming on weekends.

The City of Grand Rapids is supporting the initiative with a grant that will assist with staff and rent expenses. Private funders have also donated or pledged support for the center.

This endeavor is the result of months of discussions between the two agencies on how best to utilize their existing community centers, decrease expenses, centralize services, and address the priority needs of the unhoused. Dégagé will provide security and support staff and handle lunch operations. Mel Trotter will provide support staff for activities and on-site case management services for men. Volunteers for both organizations will serve at the new facility.

“We are eager to combine our teams at the community center, not only to provide a safe, warm space during the day for our neighbors but also to expose more men to available health and social support services,” said Thelma Ensink, Executive Director of Dégagé Ministries. “Having Mel Trotter case managers in the community space will now provide more opportunities for men to seek housing, health, and social services. We didn’t have that available in our previous day center area. This will lead to more people being housed.”

“We are excited to partner with Dégagé in this project, not only because it is the best use of our joint resources, but because having Mel Trotter and Dégagé staff in the same space allows for seamless integration of case management services between our ministries,” said Jeff Dashner, Vice President of Operations for Mel Trotter Ministries. “This will give guests access to the support they need in one space, giving them the best chance to reach their housing and employment goals.”

With this transition, Dégagé’s current community center, located in its expanded main campus building at 139 Sheldon Avenue, will be used exclusively as a daytime living, dining, and activity space for women utilizing overnight shelter services. Dégagé has seen a 371% increase in women seeking emergency shelter since 2021. In February of that year, an average of 24 women sought emergency shelter at Dégagé. In February 2024, an average of 113 women stayed in emergency shelter per night.

Dégagé’s other services at its main campus, namely showers, ID center, and rest center, will continue to operate normally for public use.

This is not the first time The Vault has supported its neighbors. Last winter, Dégagé used the building as an overflow space for women in its emergency shelter program.

“This year, we’re flipping the situation,” Ensink added. “Women in our overnight shelter will now stay in the main Dégagé building, and people from the community will use The Vault for a safe, warm daytime place that also provides more exposure to support services.”

The agencies have been working on more collaborative projects over the past few years, including the most recent partnership in providing a joint housing stabilization program to individuals housed through the 100 in 100 Project. The effort aims to house 100 individuals experiencing chronic homelessness in 100 days.

“We have learned that we can increase our impact by working together. Combining our community centers and increasing case management opportunities will allow us to serve our community's needs better. We look forward to future opportunities to save lives and help people achieve stable housing,” Ensink adds.

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