

Dégagé aims to triple housing initiative for homeless adults with mental illness: ‘We proved the concept’

Mark Sanchez - May 21, 2025



The Complex Care Housing pilot program is based in the former Hope Lodge on Jefferson Avenue in Grand Rapids. Credit: Courtesy photo

After **proving the model works** and registering strong results in the first year, Dégagé Ministries wants to extend a housing initiative for people who are chronically homeless and have a mental illness.

Dégagé Ministries estimates that another 100 to 120 individuals in Kent County could benefit from the Complex Care Housing initiative that started in early 2024 and is operated in partnership with Mel Trotter Ministries, Trinity Health Grand Rapids, Catherine's Health Center, Network 180 and the Greater Grand Rapids Chamber Foundation.

"What has really become apparent to us is just how many individuals in Grand Rapids need this level of care," Executive Director Thelma Ensink said. "We proved the concept. It's a benefit to the individual and the community and now we need to make sure we have this concept available for everyone who needs it."

Dégagé Ministries would house and serve another 30 to 50 residents in the first year and add 15 to 25 in subsequent years for an eventual total of 120. The new facilities would house both men and women residents through a collaboration with Mel Trotter Ministries, which in mid-April launched its own pilot project involving up to eight men.

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Thelma Ensink, executive director of Dégagé Ministries. Credit: Mark Sanchez, Crain's Grand Rapids Business

Dégagé Ministries has been seeking financial support for the expansion, Ensink said. The organization would need to buy or lease multiple locations that would each house 25 people.

Acquiring and renovating each location would cost an estimated \$2 million to \$5 million, “depending on what we find,” Ensink said. Dégagé Ministries estimates it will need two to three properties.

“Some properties need less renovations and others need quite a bit more, or just the purchase is a bit higher,” she said.

One possible funding source to support expansion is the state. Local legislators have requested a \$1 million earmark in the next state budget to support the initiative’s expansion.

“The pilot has proven that providing adequate housing, along with the appropriate level of care and supportive services, can create an outsized public benefit while changing the lives of the individuals being served for the better,” according to a request for funding in the state’s 2026 fiscal year budget that starts Oct. 1. “The next phase of work requires a scaling up of this successful model to address a larger segment of the chronically homeless population.”

The funding request noted that the initiative “has already demonstrated significant improvement in quality of life and long-term outcomes for individuals served.” The effort as well “delivers measurable outcomes for system resources, including reducing unnecessary emergency room use, public safety calls for service, district court filings and procedures, and emergency medical services.”

“This model supports efforts to reduce chronic and unsheltered homelessness in Kent County which creates vibrant commercial corridors as well as clean, healthy, and safe public spaces for residents, visitors, businesses, and employees,” according to the request submitted by Rep. Stephen Wooden, a

Democrat representing portions of Grand Rapids, Ada Township, Grand Rapids Township and Plainfield Township in Kent County.

The funding request has the backing of the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce, which is part of a coalition to address homelessness.

In a letter of support accompanying the funding request, President and CEO Rick Baker wrote that the Grand Rapids Chamber was “thrilled by the work being done to improve outcomes” for people who are chronically homeless and that “it is clear that our community has a greater need for housing with complex care services.”

“The outcomes created by Dégagé in one year of providing services show that this type of facility can not only vastly improve the quality of life for vulnerable individuals but provide significant system benefits in health care, public safety and emergency systems,” Baker wrote.

Dégagé Ministries and Trinity Health Grand Rapids launched the Complex Care Housing initiative in 2024 as a pilot with 25 women. The initiative is designed for individuals with severe mental illness and substance use disorder who have experienced chronic homelessness for several years and have been unsuccessful in other housing models.

Participants receive housing with 24-hour onsite support that includes case management and medical and psychiatric care.

In the first year, the initiative significantly cut hospital emergency room visits and EMS calls for women who are chronically homeless and have behavioral health issues.

All remain living at the Heartside Landings facility near Trinity Health Grand Rapids’ hospital campus. About half of them are now ready to transition to living independently in leased space within the facility or elsewhere, Ensink said.

Emergency room visits for the first 25 participants declined 65%, from 474 in 2023 to 167 in 2024. One resident who had 66 ER visits in 2023 reduced them by 100% in 2024.

EMS calls involving the 25 participants declined 87% from 128 in 2023 to 17 in 2024.

Dégagé Ministries and Mel Trotter Ministries now aim to build on that success working through the Grand Rapids Chamber Foundation.

“We saw that the concept was not only effective for the individuals, but also effective for the community, both in saving the community dollars and in helping these individuals be in safe spaces, instead of at our storefronts or on our streets, or even in our jails,” Ensink said.

To expand, Dégagé Ministries is “looking for all types of properties,” including former schools, hotels and health care facilities that it can convert or renovate into housing, Ensink said.

The potential funding in the next state budget represents just one source of financial support, she said. Dégagé Ministries also is going after philanthropic support, a federal budget earmark, low-income tax

credits, and private funding. Expanding capacity does not hinge on the state Legislature including the \$1 million earmark in the budget, “but it would be a really big help,” Ensink said.

“We’re looking at a variety of funding sources to make this happen, but \$1 million would be a good start, probably toward one of the properties,” said Ensink, who aims to complete the fundraising and expand the initiative’s capacity within two to three years.

“The sooner we do it, the better, because every day that these individuals are on the street is life-threatening for them and it is impacting our community, but we recognize it’s going to take time to identify the right properties and raise the funds,” she said. “It’s going to be a long process, but we’re committed to it and we have great partners.”

The number of homeless people that Dégagé Ministries serves has been “dramatically increasing” in recent years, Ensink said. In 2020, when she became executive director, Dégagé Ministries averaged 35 women nightly seeking emergency shelter. Today, “we rarely see a night below 100,” Ensink said.

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