

HOMELESS CENTER TO PROVIDE RELIEF DOWNTOWN

24/7 Gateway Center's services a plus for residential and business communities

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On a February night this year, a team of volunteers counted more than 2,000 people in a tri-jurisdictional area -- the city of Atlanta and Fulton and DeKalb counties -- who made the streets their home.

The 24/7 Gateway Center, scheduled for a June opening at 236 Peachtree St. S.W., will aim to provide the assistance the homeless need before the next winter winds blow.

The center is not a shelter; it's a big part of the effort to end chronic homelessness in Atlanta.

"After we've said 'Welcome,' after we've begun the journey of building a relationship, then [we ask] 'What do you need to maximize your daily life?' " said Vince Smith, the [Atlanta Union Mission](#)'s director of community relations and senior chaplain, who will be Gateway's director. The Atlanta Union Mission will operate the center.

"First is housing, in many instances, it's jobs, and support services. As we wrap ourselves around those three issues, we can begin to eliminate the need for shelter beds. In many cases, emergency shelters are revolving doors," he said.

The center's capital budget was \$5.09 million, of which about \$314,000 of was in-kind donations.

As far as the city's image is concerned, Spurgeon Richardson, CEO and president of the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau, said the Gateway Center will only help.

"It's going to be constructive because it's going to take people off the streets who really, really need help," Richardson said. "It's providing assistance, and that's what we want to do, right?"

Smith and others involved in the Gateway Center say it won't necessarily spur economic activity. But the center will help prepare people to be a part of Atlanta's economic growth, said Horace Sibley, chairman of the Regional Commission on Homelessness. There will be a food service training program within the 24/7 Gateway Center run by Project Open Hand, for example.

"We'll be training people to be constructive, productive workers," Sibley said.

Overall, Smith said the center will be a plus for both the residential and business communities in the area.

"I don't think the center itself will become an economic engine; that's not its purpose," Smith said. "It does significantly support other major economic engines.

"For example, having a 24/7 center like this allows homeless persons an appropriate place to immediately connect, find engagement and triage," he continued. "I think [that] then supports the voice of residents downtown who are sometimes frustrated by the conditions that homeless people find themselves in, oftentimes by no fault of their own, because there is no place for them to be."

Smith said other cities are looking at Gateway's setup as an effort they may want to replicate. The Atlanta Union Mission is under a joint agreement with [United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta](#) to oversee and manage the collaborative services.

"The center allows agencies, institutions and various stakeholders to have a central place of coordinated effort of collaboration so we get to maximize resources, we get to maximize program capabilities, and we get to determine how we can help an individual with their input in a more expeditious manner," Smith said.

The nonprofit group [Pathways Community Network](#), whose volunteers performed the February census, found a total of 6,956 homeless people in the tri-jurisdictional area in its March 2003 count.

Most were found in places such as shelters, hospitals and jail, while more than 1,900 were unsheltered, or on the street. About 16 percent were parents and children. Pathways is still compiling the total number of homeless from its February count. A Clayton County census is scheduled for next January.

Brandie Haywood, the 2005 homeless census project coordinator, said the 24/7 Gateway Center will be an efficient and effective way of serving people.

"One of its primary focuses will be to bring people in off the street that have been service-resistant in the past. It's a lofty goal, but an extremely important one," Haywood said. "The hope is that people who are chronically homeless, once they are stabilized and placed in a better situation, that will free up the resources to help the rest of the homeless population."

The center will have 300 "program-connected" beds, Smith said, meaning the person taking up the bed has certain responsibilities and accountability. Thirty beds will be for women and children in a separate, limited-access area.

The [Atlanta Women's Foundation](#) is also in the fight to end homelessness, focusing on women and children.

"Initially, Gateway was intended to have more resources and more space devoted to women and children and it was the [service] providers who said that wouldn't work," said Sally Weaver, CEO of the foundation.

The providers explained that having a greater mix of women and children at Gateway would bring "a whole host of problems in terms of security and access and cost, because it increases the cost if you have to have completely divided spaces and entryways," Weaver said. "Trying to combine men and women did not represent best practices."

"Our concern was, what's next in the sequence and what do we need to be addressing? Gateway's not the issue for us; it's what are we doing for women and children?" Weaver said.

With help from the Women's Legacy of United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta and the city of Atlanta, the foundation is working on opening several facilities that, in total, will have about 100 emergency shelter beds. The facilities will replace the beds lost after the shelter on Milton Avenue closes in August.

The foundation also has collaborated with Commercial Real Estate Women in Atlanta, doling out more than \$1 million to fund programs aimed at ending homelessness.

The help is greatly needed, Weaver said. "Women tend to become homeless as the result of some event that occurs in their life: domestic violence, loss of employment," she said. "There's no support system around them to help them move through that catastrophic event in their life."