

# NEWS-STAR

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## Rally targets city cuts to homeless shelters



Advocates, young and old, demonstrate for the restoration of cuts to city homeless shelters in Daley Plaza, Tuesday, July 26. (Joe Cyganowski/Chief Photographer)

# Advocates seek restoration of funding

By PATRICK BUTLER  
Staff Writer

Some 200 operators and residents of several North Side homeless shelters facing deep funding cuts took their case to the doorstep of City Hall last week.

"We're not going away," Robert Harris, a formerly homeless member of the Uptown-based Organization of the North East, told a Tuesday, July 26, Daley Plaza rally protesting cuts in programs and beds at at least five local emergency shelters.

The homeless services budget was slashed from \$17 to \$15 million on June 13 by the city's Human Services Department, partly because of an \$800,000 cut in city spending, a DHS spokesman said at the time.

While some of those funds have since been restored by the city, shelter operators and community activists aren't claiming victory just yet, said Kathleen Ahler, director of Rest, which runs shelters at 941 W. Lawrence, 6253 N. Kenmore, and Wilson and Sheridan.

"We're concerned with getting all the money restored, not part of it," she said.

The cuts have already shut down the daytime programs at the shelter, run by the Lake View Lutheran Church, 835 W. Addison, and as a result, "we find ourselves on the street about 14 hours a day," a resident identified only as "Larry" told the rally.

"The city says money is the problem, but we find the money for other things like a \$400 million budget overrun for Millennium Park. They found the money to water the flowers from a barge on the lake. What's that cost? Water the people," he added.

Rev. Liala Beukema, pastor of Lake View Lutheran, said her congregation plans an Oct. 10 benefit to keep the daytime programs at North Side Housing and Supportive Services, as the church shelter is now called.

According to Bill Mueller, those daytime services at the church shelter's drop-in center annually serve more than 19,000 meals, and provided over 1,500 "medical encounters" that saved the community \$120,000 in doctor and hospital costs.

The funding for those doctor visits is being cut by half, Mueller told the rally.

According to an impact statement released by the Lake View Shelter, the agency's food pantry and clothes closet and drop-in center will cease operating, and the budget for CTA passes to help clients get to job interviews will be cut by \$3,500, meaning 2,000 fewer bus and L rides will be available.

DHS officials say the cuts were "consistent" with a plan to eliminate much of the city's homelessness within 10 years by getting as many homeless people as possible into permanent housing rather than temporary shelters.

"It's not a permanent shelter system. It's a temporary stop. It's not a place to live in. You're supposed to come in, get what you need and move on," Vargas explained when the cuts were announced last month.

Rather than place homeless people in temporary shelters, the goal is to immediately find them permanent housing with supportive services, DHS officials said. The rationale, they explained, is that people can better concentrate on job training, education, substance abuse treatment and other services when they don't have to worry about their housing situation.

While that sounds laudable, it's easier said than done, said Rest President Mike O'Hara, noting that his agency provides beds for 165 men and women, yet must still turn away an average of 33 people a night.

And while O'Hara is relieved that all but \$5,000 or \$6,000 of the DHS funds have been restored for the coming year, it's the long-term situation that has him worried.

If DHS is going to "transition" from temporary shelters to permanent housing, O'Hara wonders where those apartments are in a city with an estimated 15,000 homeless on any given night - 2,000 to 2,500 of them on the North Side.

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"The city talks about ending homeless in 10 years. That was two years ago...If that permanent housing becomes available, fine. But until then, a shelter is the only option," O'Hara said.

Ald. Helen Shiller, whose 46th Ward houses several of the affected shelters, said DHS is "moving ahead with this 10-year-plan and there are people trying to maintain the status quo while that's happening. Both are good positions."

While "the idea is to have as many people as possible in permanent housing, you have to do what you need to do to keep the daytime programs," added Shiller, who said she's been in "ongoing discussions" with both the city and homeless advocates.