

The decision to close the Amerpersee Encampment, the encampment and homelessness in general is a challenging, complex, and emotional situation for all parties involved. The decision to close the Ampersee Encampment was made by the City Manager's office and myself (Jim Ritsema).

After numerous conversations with our partners, including the County, the Continuum of Care and others, where we all agreed the conditions of the camp were unsafe.

The conditions at the Ampersee Encampment presented significant risk to the health and safety of those living at the Encampment, those that visit the site to provide support and services as well as those living and working nearby.

Additionally, KDPS calls for service doubled between June and August.

On September 15, the City posted notices and issued a release indicating our intent to enclose the encampment on September 29.

The closure was postponed to allow for more outreach activities to occur in an effort to connect people with services and shelter.

So, the question of, why now?

The safety of everyone living in our community is our top priority. The conditions at the Ampersee encampment were growing increasingly more unsafe. The encampment was located in a Brownfield site which by definition is unsafe and unhealthy for humans habitation due to hazardous substances in the ground.

The encampment grew significantly in recent months with many inhabitants coming from outside Kalamazoo.

The increasing dangers at the encampment were not in alignment with the guidelines for safe camping.

The Continuum of Care participated in and supported closure, working to connect people with shelters and services available in our community prior to enforcement.

The outreach conducted prior to closure, so immediately before closure, we paused closure efforts to allow the Continuum of Care and service providers to conduct a final, comprehensive and coordinated outreach effort.

On October 4, twelve agencies participated in the outreach event to offer support with housing, shelter, recovery services, and food. The results of the outreach event included 13 people that opted for shelter at the Kalamazoo Gospel Mission and Oakland House, 50 people received cell phones to remain connected to services, and two families were provided transportation to be reunited with their families living outside of the area.

When we announced the closure, the Continuum of Care estimated approximately 100 people at the encampment. At the conclusion of the October 4th event, the Continuum of Care estimated that about 50 people remained.

So, leading up to the Closure announcement, organizations had designated staff to help coordinate housing for encampment residents and per guidelines from HUD, the first priority is to try to link all residents with available shelter beds in our community.

Kalamazoo has had and continues to have enough shelter capacity to accommodate those living in the encampments.

If individuals could not access shelter due to medical conditions or extenuating circumstances, alternative options were explored based on eligibility for current programs.

This process is established for everyone experiencing homelessness in our community not just those in the encampments.

We know that some people experiencing homelessness are more visible than others and we have to find ways to support all of our community in need.

Other options being pursued such as exploring master leasing units as they become available. The Continuum of Care partners have provided case work and other support daily since the encampment formed last spring, and prior to the Mills Encampment, launched an exit strategy to help inhabitants find safer options.

Outreach coordination focused on connected people to available support services. Partners include Integrated Services of Kalamazoo, which is a one-on-one outreach, Housing Resources, Inc, which coordinated every entry assistance including available shelter, rapid rehousing, and rental aid which was one-on-one outreach and, the Urban Alliance, which was one-on-one outreach as well.

Shelter services, which currently has the capacity to serve all of those that were at the encampment, offering shelter space is Kalamazoo Gospel Ministries, men, women and families, Oakland House's shelter and addiction services, Open Doors, which is for men, Next Door which is for women, YWCA Domestic Violence shelter for women, the Ark for the Youth which is for youth, and Keystone which is for veterans and Ministry with Community which is a day shelter and support services.

So again, those are the shelters services that are available in our community.

Addiction Services which is helping those with substance abuse disorder, providing these supports are Integrated Services Kalamazoo, Recovery Institute and Southwest Behavioral Health.

And food assistance and making sure people have enough to eat, partners in this including Ministry With Community provides two meals daily at their location. Kalamazoo Gospel Ministries which provides two meals daily at their location and Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes which is an on site delivery of food and water and a grocery pantry.

So, what's next?

The City is working closely with the Continuum of Care, Kalamazoo County, and community partners to explore numerous housing solutions ranging from temporary to permanent.

Staff was recently at a conference in Portland, OR in which they were able to see first hand some of the creative designs that exist for people working to transition out of homelessness.

We are actively evaluating sites and funding sources to bring a pilot to Kalamazoo before the end of the year. Recognizing solutions need to focus even more on wrap around supports than on physical infrastructure.

So, as it stands right now, options for the unhoused are KGM (Kalamazoo Gospel Mission) and the Continuum of Care, city staff partners recently toured the facility and talked through who can access shelter and supports at KGM.

There are only a handful of individuals who are not currently able to utilize KGM due to violence committed against other residents or staff. Beyond that, the message is, they want to be available to support the community in need.

Currently, The Mission has capacity in all areas and estimate they can easily accommodate more than 100 people.

When the expansion project is finished in December, they will add almost 200 beds so no longer will people have to sleep on mats on the floor but there will be a bed for each person that stays at the Gospel Mission.

The Continuum of Care is working on a county wide plan to reduce homelessness that recognizes the need for a variety of housing options.