

St. Paul's expansion is crucial for unhoused

UPPER VALLEY HAVEN

By **MICHAEL REDMOND**

For the Valley News

This Monday, I'll represent the interests of the Upper Valley Haven, a homeless shelter and community resource organization in Hartford, where I'm executive director, at a meeting of the Hartford Planning Commission. I will be there to present our proposal to add a new building adjacent to our campus on Hartford Avenue that will provide additional space to accommodate much-needed shelter beds and a resource center where Haven guests and community members can get help with finding housing, employment, and other services and resources that will support their goals.

We believe strongly in our mission.

Unfortunately, not everyone believes that this new project should be approved. Some are concerned that the addition of this new building and the services we provide will attract more people who are unhoused to the neighborhood, people who may bring problems with them that will affect the Haven's neighbors' quality of life and personal safety. We've listened to these concerns, we understand them and we are committed to working with the community to build and manage a space that will be safer for our guests and the greater community alike.

The Haven was founded over 40 years ago by five Upper Valley churches, united in the belief that everyone should have a home. Today, it continues to focus on providing food, shelter and housing to people who are experiencing multiple challenges. We never charge for our services. If people come to our door or call us, we help them. About 85% of our revenue is from charitable gifts from people who live in the Upper Valley. And the Haven is, and has always been, a place where people "find hope and discover possibility."

As homelessness has risen in Vermont for the last dozen years or so — to the point where Vermont now has the ninth-highest rate of homelessness in the U.S. — we at the Haven have tried to keep up by increasing our staff and repurposing our existing space to fit more guests, even as we add programs designed to address the complex root causes of homelessness. But our last major building project was 12 years ago when the Hixon Adult Shelter opened. We now find ourselves challenged to adequately meet the need for our services within the constraints of the programs and office spaces available on our campus.

We are seeking approval to add a new building that we're calling "the Haven at St. Paul's." It addresses these challenges and creates new opportunities for us to do our

At the first-floor day station and resource center, guests will be able to remain inside during the coldest and stormiest days of the winter and hottest days of the summer. This will help keep people safe, off the streets and engaged in bettering their lives. The resource center will provide opportunities to meet with our service coordinators (who will move from tight quarters of an existing building to this new space) and work on future plans. Visitors will have computer work stations to assist with housing and job searches and to provide necessary access to resources required in our modern world. There's also a meeting room and classroom that will allow other service providers to come to the Haven on selected days to provide outreach and share information.

We believe that the services we can provide in this new building will improve our capacity to support people who count on us and will lead to better outcomes for those who use our services, such as improved life skills and permanent housing.

Meanwhile, the risks of doing nothing are far greater. A severely imbalanced housing market and the rising cost of food portend hastening demand for the Haven's services in the years to come. Without this proposed building, our capacity to feed and house every person who comes through our doors will be stifled. For the past four decades, the Haven has been the place that people turn to when hard times arrive. We are asking that we be granted the opportunity to do our best work on behalf of all residents of Hartford and the Upper Valley. The proposed building won't solve all our community's problems, but it is an important step in the right direction.

If you are a Hartford resident and want to see people who are struggling with housing and food insecurity get the help they need in the Upper Valley, the Planning Commission needs to hear your voice. Please email your support to the Commission at jells@hartford-vt.org and/or attend the virtual meeting on Monday at 6:30 p.m.

Michael Redmond is the executive director of the Upper Valley Haven.

best work. The building will be 8,600 square feet between two floors. It includes space for a 17-bed low-barrier shelter on the second floor and a day station and resource center on the first. The shelter will feature “trauma-based design,” including room layouts, color schemes, furniture selection and operating procedures, among other features. Rather than offering a congregate sleeping room, we’ll provide sleeping compartments that provide guests a sense of security and safety, space for storage of personal items, electric outlets for charging and a reading lamp to accommodate different sleeping schedules. It will also include showers, bathrooms, dining and socialization spaces, laundry facilities and space for outside services such as medical clinics.

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