

Supportive Housing Overview



Fighting Homelessness

The personal situations that lead to homelessness such as mental illness and periods of little or no income take place in all communities. But effective solutions are possible. Many are recommended in the 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness, prepared by the Milwaukee Continuum of Care and endorsed by the Common Council through adoption of file #100568 on September 21, 2010.

That plan proposes the development of 1260 new units of permanent supportive housing in Milwaukee County within 10 years (By prorating the population, the plan calls for 800 of these units to be located in the city of Milwaukee.) The adopted plan also calls for a “Supportive Housing Siting Plan” that will assist in combating zoning barriers to development of such housing.

Working with Milwaukee County and Community Advocates, Department of Development planners have completed that plan and presented it to the Common Council in October 2010. The legislation proposed in file #100848 would make it easier to implement such solutions in Milwaukee.

Multi-family Permanent Supportive Housing

One solution to chronic homelessness is to provide at-risk individuals with a home and a modest level of supportive services in a multi-family (apartment) building. This approach is called Permanent Supportive Housing and its effectiveness has been proven nationally. It’s not a shelter. It’s not transitional housing. It’s just home for people who pay rent affordable rent to live independently in an environment conducive to recovery.

Permanent Supportive Housing has been shown to reduce the societal costs of homelessness like higher than usual numbers of trips to the emergency room and police calls. And it doesn’t lower surrounding property values. In fact, a

2008 study by New York University indicated that property values within 1000 feet of new permanent supportive housing developments increase steadily.¹

The photos on page 1 depict examples of Permanent Supportive Housing apartments built in Milwaukee during the last several years. The typical development is an attractive, multifamily building with efficiency or one-bedroom apartments, each occupied by one individual or family. The buildings have a controlled and carefully monitored front door, offices for on-site case management and peer support, and some shared resources like a computer room, a community room, and a kitchen for social functions.

Our experience in working with Permanent Supportive Housing in Milwaukee has taught us that the projects are challenging to develop. Part of the problem is the difficulty of mixing financing to fund a partnership between a housing developer and a service provider. It takes a lot of organizational acumen to accomplish Permanent Supportive Housing.

The second part of the problem is us, or rather, the City of Milwaukee Zoning Code. Permanent Supportive Housing is a type of multi-family housing, and is permitted wherever multi-family housing is permitted. However, density standards and parking requirements that make a lot of sense for most multi-family buildings add needless cost to Permanent Supportive Housing. The Permanent Supportive Housing model provides small, affordable efficiencies and one-bedroom apartments. Residents seldom have cars. To get relief from density and parking requirements that add considerable costs to these buildings, each development must seek rezoning as a Planned Development or seek dimensional variances from the Board of Zoning Appeals.

Proposed substitute ordinance #100848, sponsored by Aldermen Michael Murphy, James Witkowiak and Willie Wade, achieves plan recommendations with two changes to the zoning code.

1. Density standards for Permanent Supportive Housing buildings with small living units are increased, simplifying development of these buildings on modestly-sized lots.
2. The number of parking spaces required for Permanent Supportive Housing buildings is reduced. One parking space is required for every five units. Other multi-family housing must provide one parking space per unit, or two spaces per every three units.

The new dimensional standards proposed in the ordinance mirror the standards that the Council has adopted in detailed planned development zoning for several of the Permanent Supportive Housing buildings constructed since 2008.

¹ The Impact of Supportive Housing on Surrounding Neighborhoods: Evidence from New York City, Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, New York University, November 2008



Individual supportive housing units

Some individuals at risk of homelessness live within individual dwelling units with Milwaukee County Behavioral Health Division support. Current zoning has been interpreted to consider some of these dwellings to be Transitional Living Facilities.” The proposed substitute ordinance removes individual supportive housing units occupied by up to three people from the zoning ordinance definition of “Transitional Living Facility.” Under the changes proposed in file #100848, these living units will be treated just like any other living unit occupied by up to three unrelated adults.

Under a future ordinance, these individual dwelling units could qualify for a Supportive Housing Unit Certificate. Qualifying for a certificate would require that the unit be inspected by the city Department of Neighborhood Services. Milwaukee County would provide a list of certified units for the discretionary use of their clients. The certificates would go a long way toward assuring safe, decent, sanitary housing for a vulnerable population and reassuring neighbors that standards are being met. For the sake of practicality the ordinance creating these certificates will be introduced later.

Transitional Housing

Permanent Supportive Housing is not appropriate for every need. Some individuals need greater assistance such as supervision, counseling, and a residential treatment program for some period of time. This more rigorous approach is called Transitional Housing. Clients could be leaving the correctional system, undergoing treatment for drug use disorder, have a disability, experiencing homelessness, or some combination. Currently these types of proposals routinely go to BOZA for special use permits. The file continues the requirement for BOZA approval. In addition, the file makes the following changes:

1. All Transitional Housing would be subjected to an annual fire inspection. Only multi-family buildings are now inspected.
2. The threshold of the number of clients that constitutes Transitional Housing would rise from 3 to 4 persons per building.

Conclusion

The substitute ordinance #100848 helps to make Milwaukee a more welcoming environment for appropriate forms of supportive housing to serve vulnerable residents, while protecting the interests of neighborhoods. The ordinance accomplishes several of the goals of the 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness and the Supportive Housing Siting Plan.

