

Minneapolis shelter is expanding in the face of new barriers for homeless and LGBTQ youth

Avenues for Youth has broken ground on a new \$24 million facility in north Minneapolis that will open in 2026.

By Susan Du
The Minnesota Star Tribune

June 14, 2025



Makeda Lacking, a current program manager and former youth at Avenues for Youth, conducts an hourly resident room check at Avenues shelter in Brooklyn Park.

(Alex Kormann/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

Avenues for Youth, a nonprofit serving homeless youth from all over the country, has outgrown its 90-year-old shelter in the Near North neighborhood of Minneapolis.

The building, which Avenues rents from the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority, is run-down and cramped. Seventeen

young people currently live on its second floor, tripled up in bedrooms and negotiating just two bathrooms. Among a group with significant trauma — studies have shown [homeless youth](#) face higher rates of child abuse, neglect and sex trafficking than their peers — conflicts frequently flare in close quarters.

This summer, Avenues broke ground on a new facility at 1404 N. 8th Av., a vacant lot across the street from Bethune Park. The project, expected to cost more than \$24 million and open by fall 2026, will allow Avenues to serve 500 youth annually, up from 300 currently. There will be space to hang out, more emergency shelter beds, individual rooms for the transitional housing program (on average a year-long stay) and affordable apartments for those 18 and older to build rental history.

Avenues needed to expand to meet an exceptionally difficult moment, CEO Katherine Meerse said.

“We definitely see young people coming from greater Minnesota to the Twin Cities to find shelter and housing because there’s not enough available to them,” she said. “We have definitely seen, since Minnesota declared itself a trans refuge state, young people coming from other states to Minnesota because of that, and they do reach out ... because in some cases, they have come without any housing options, and they’re looking for a place to stay.”



Makeda Lacking, a current program manager and former youth at Avenues for Youth, loads the dishwasher alongside a current resident.

(Alex Kormann/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

Not enough open doors

On any given night, Avenues has to turn away homeless youth. There are only enough beds for about 20% of those in need of a place to stay, Meerse estimated.

Lisa Mears, executive director of the Bridge for Youth and co-director of the

Youth Services Network, a collective of service providers across the state, backed that figure.

According to the latest [Minnesota Homeless Study](#) conducted by Wilder Research, more than 4,000 children and

youth (up to 24 years old) experienced homelessness on a single night.

But more than the dearth of shelter beds, Mears said she's worried about the increasingly complicated mental health needs of homeless youth today.

"There are youth experiencing homelessness who need shelter beds with much more robust mental health supports than any one of the providers of the Youth Services Network could provide safely," she said. "The youth homeless response system, we are not licensed

mental health facilities, but we are being asked to show up in that way. And we can't."

The Youth Services Network runs a website that tracks [real-time shelter availability](#) in the metro area. Shelters listed there are frequently grayed out, meaning they're full. There are also providers in Rochester, St. Cloud, Duluth and Bemidji, but the collective hasn't had the money to retool the website to include them.

What success looks like

Avenues' second shelter, in Brooklyn Park at 7210 76th Av. N., was built in 2013 with the trauma-informed design principles that the organization is now looking to duplicate in its new north Minneapolis location.

Outcomes in Brooklyn Park have been better than in north Minneapolis, despite having nearly identical demographics and programming, because of the Brooklyn Park building's modern features, Avenues concluded after comparing five years of data on how long youth stayed with the program and how many exited to stable housing.

Makeda Lacking, program manager at the Brooklyn Park shelter, had gone through Avenues herself as a 16-year-old who had just moved from Mississippi. Her parents, who are Muslim, kicked her out after she came out as gay. Family reunification therapy didn't work. She slept in parks

and on buses before finding Avenues, which helped her return to high school and eventually graduate from college.

The Avenues she works for now is much more diverse than the one she left as a teenager, Lacking said, with staff of color reflecting the predominantly Black and Indigenous youth they serve.

"The biggest thing for me was the non-judgmental piece ... just knowing that Avenues saw me as a whole person, not someone just experiencing homelessness, not someone with traumatic experiences," she said. "Now doing the work, I see it over and over again — the stories have changed, but that resiliency in our young people is strong, and it gets stronger, I feel, with each generation."

The Youth Services Network [asked the Legislature](#) this year for funding for

emergency shelters and services for youth victims of sex trafficking. About \$1.6 million will be allocated to those issues next year, with additional millions to come in subsequent years, said Beth Holger, CEO of the Link.

Avenues continues to raise money for the north Minneapolis site through its “[A Home of a Our Own](#)” campaign.



Makeda Lacking makes the bed in a resident bedroom at the Brooklyn Park Avenues for Youth shelter.

(Alex Kormann/The Minnesota Star Tribune)