

Salt Lake County's Third Homeless Shelter Complete, But Concerns Remain

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After a four-month delay stemming from weather and permitting issues, Salt Lake County officials Tuesday celebrated the completion of the county's third — and final — new homeless resource center. Officials are still working on putting the final touches on the building, located in South Salt Lake, such as putting in mattresses and moving in staff, before they bring in residents starting later this month. Now that all three homeless shelters are in place, the next step will be to close down The Road Home's shelter in downtown Salt Lake City for good despite [ongoing concerns about bed space at the new women's shelter](#).

Preston Cochrane, the executive director of Shelter the Homeless, which owns the three shelters, said the new centers have just as many beds as the downtown shelter.

"If we're in a situation where we don't have enough beds in a resource center, we also have overflow options at the Weigand Center and St. Vincent de Paul (homeless resource center)," he said. "You also have hotel-motel options and looking at some other warming-type structures so that everyone has a place to go."

A Shifting Service Model

The grand opening comes as a two-year, law enforcement-led effort to reduce crime and homelessness in Salt Lake City's Rio Grande neighborhood sunsets.

[A recent report](#) by ACLU Utah found Operation Rio Grande's heavy police presence led to many low-level arrests, which it said could have far-reaching consequences for people experiencing homelessness and already struggling to find shelter.

Christina Judd, spokeswoman for the Salt Lake City Police Department, said it was not ideal for law enforcement to lead the effort. But with few homeless resources available at the time and a neighborhood overwhelmed by crime and drugs, the police had to step in.

"That is a realm that needs to be flooded with social services, social workers, and treatment facilities," she said. "That is really what needs to happen to keep this from ever happening again."

Now, after ongoing changes to the city and county's homeless service model, Judd said local officials understand they need to take a different approach to the issue.

Even with the expected closure of the downtown Road Home shelter in four weeks, Salt Lake City is launching a housing initiative that it hopes will alleviate strains on homeless resources.

David Litvack, Mayor Jackie Biskupski's deputy chief of staff, said the initiative is aimed at helping individuals get out of shelters and into long-term housing over the next four weeks. Already the group has identified 27 people who have access to housing vouchers but are struggling to find an apartment. Litvack thinks that could be due to the city's ongoing affordable housing shortage and low vacancy rate.

The city is asking landlords and property managers to share information on open units that may be available. Litvack is optimistic that they will have success.

"When we've had this type of call, individual landlords and property manager firms have stepped up and filled the void," he said. "That's what we are banking on again."