



**THURSDAY**

October 4, 2018

## Union Gospel Mission adds mental health clinic at St. Paul homeless shelter

More than six in 10 homeless people in Minnesota report struggling with significant mental illness, experts say.

By [Shannon Prather](#) Star Tribune

OCTOBER 4, 2018 — 10:04PM



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Psychologist Meaghan Johansen was hired by the mission.

can be fully functional and self-sufficient and not relapsing into homelessness.”

The center, located at the men’s campus on University Avenue E. in St. Paul, offers drop-in, individual and group counseling, and psychological and emotional assessments. Johansen, who started in June, estimates they’re already seeing 100 patients and expects the number to grow dramatically.

More than [six in 10](#) homeless people in Minnesota report struggling with significant mental illness — and that may underrepresent its prevalence, experts say.

That’s why the [Union Gospel Mission Twin Cities](#), which runs emergency homeless shelters in St. Paul, says it has for the first time hired a licensed psychologist and opened a full-time in-house mental health clinic.

Psychologist Meaghan Johansen treats guests at the mission and supervises a team of 11 counselors, social workers and graduate student interns.

The initiative reflects the fact that homelessness is often more than just a financial crisis, Gospel Mission staff said.

“The quick fix of getting people into an apartment is not addressing the underlying needs that led them to homelessness in the first place,” Johansen said. “Our ultimate goal is that true transformation for them, so they



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Tasson Billings, who said he has drifted for years and traveled across the country living in shelters, said counseling through Union Gospel Mission is helping him address childhood trauma and function better. Here, he

worked on his math class via computer at the mission's Learning Center.

People can walk into the clinic for immediate help or make weekly appointments.

Tasson Billings said he spent several years drifting from city to city after leaving an abusive family situation. He didn't fully comprehend what was keeping him on the streets. He just knew he felt broken.

"I couldn't live a daily routine," Billings said. "I had no idea how to be me."

Today, he's five months into a Union Gospel Mission program for men — living and studying on the mission's St. Paul campus and attending weekly counseling appointments. Billings said it has helped him to start to understand why he ended up on the streets and how to move forward.

"I didn't realize the damage I sustained in my childhood," Billings said.

He said the easy-to-access counseling is "phenomenal."

Billings said he has encountered people during his wandering who also struggled with past, sometimes-debilitating traumas. "They just gave up and gave into defeat," he said.

Johansen, a clinical and forensic psychologist with a doctoral degree, said her patients often grapple with post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Before opening the clinic, Union Gospel referred people to outside mental health services, but it's unclear if people actually connected with those services. Sometimes the wait for outside care took months.

Johansen said her location inside the mission has allowed her to speak with people in crisis immediately and possibly avoid a trip to the hospital. The in-house location also makes continued treatment more convenient and more productive, she said.

"We can build trust and continue with services. Trust is sometimes difficult for this population," Johansen said. "We

are someone who will listen to them, will help advocate for them and teach them skills. That is extraordinarily important."

### **'Restore the whole person'**

Health Care for the Homeless, a nonprofit providing medical services, partners with the mission to provide medical care for residents and prescribe nonaddictive medications.

"This fulfills the vision of mine to provide services to restore the whole person," Union Gospel CEO Charles Morgan said in a written statement. "We want to attend to spiritual, physical and mental health needs to help individuals successfully reconnect with their families and contribute to their community."

Union Gospel Mission runs a variety of programs including a 194-bed emergency men's shelter, a transitional housing facility for homeless men, a separate shelter for women and children, a child-care center and a residential addiction recovery program.

John Anderson, an Army veteran who served in the first Gulf War, has been living at Union Gospel Mission for the past three months and has been seeing a counselor on a weekly basis. He had been living with his elderly parents and decided he needed to change his life. He had tried counseling in the past through the Department of Veterans Affairs, but he said he wasn't prepared to dredge up all those emotions at that time. Now, Anderson said he's finally ready.

"I've been digging in. The counselor has seen a lot of growth in me," Anderson said. "I look forward to the sessions. I know I am helping myself."

**Shannon Prather** has covered philanthropy and nonprofits for the past two years. She has two decades of experience reporting for newspapers in Minnesota, California, Idaho, Wisconsin and North Dakota. She has covered a variety of topics including the legal system, law enforcement, education, municipal government and slice-of-life community news.

[Shannon.Prather@startribune.com](mailto:Shannon.Prather@startribune.com) 612-673-4804