

# Keeping the Faith

Belfast city councilors discuss a transitional housing proposal.

By Jim Leonard Jan 9, 2025, Updated Jan 15, 2025

Midcoast Maine Homeless Coalition has proposed a transitional housing facility for "three to four families" in the Belfast United Methodist Church, pictured, at 23 Mill Lane in East Belfast.



Photo by Kyle Laurita

BELFAST — A group of faith-based organizations in the Belfast area has come together to propose a unique solution for families experiencing homelessness.

Midcoast Maine Homeless Coalition, a nonprofit organization of local church groups, was before the Belfast City Council on Jan. 7 to propose a transitional housing facility in the city. The group is made up of members from a handful of churches in Belfast and Lincolnville, as well as members of the Greater Bay Area Ministries.

Transitional housing is generally defined as accommodations for people who may need longer housing while looking for permanent housing. The MMHC proposal identifies the program as “transitional,” as opposed to a homeless shelter, which provides temporary overnight housing.”

“This is not a [homeless] shelter,” said Kathy Muzzy, who chairs the coalition's board. “It would provide stable, overnight housing for three to four families, not individuals, not people coming in off the street.”

The proposed transitional housing would be located in the Belfast United Methodist Church at 23 Mill Lane in East Belfast. Muzzy told the council that families housed there would receive meals and necessary services required to transition to a more permanent living situation. Computer access will be provided to allow family members to register for programs and fill out necessary applications.

The program would be available only to Belfast families experiencing housing instability. The facility would be staffed by two employees (one full-time, one part-time) and volunteers 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The proposed program is modeled after the national program Family Promise, with one notable exception. Muzzy told councilors that Family Promise programming is aimed at large urban centers, while the proposed MMHC program is designed to support families in Belfast.

Muzzy told the council the proposal was for discussion and direction. The group was seeking the city’s response to the idea and suggestions of next steps toward receiving final approval. She added the group hoped to receive approval “as soon as possible” to allow time for the targeted space to be renovated, and said MMHC was not seeking financial support from the city.

The targeted space for the transitional housing facility is currently unoccupied. MMHC intends to rent the space from the church.

MMHC will partner with Waldo Community Action Partners to provide transportation and other essential services to families in transition.

MMHC board member Mary Sullivan told councilors the facility would be run by those in the faith-based community who have a good handle on area families in need. All of the families to receive transitional housing would be screened.

Belfast Director of Codes and Planning Bub Fournier noted the system currently used by Belfast for transitional housing is less than ideal.

“The city has been using motels and hotels as temporary housing for people who don’t have a place to stay for a long time,” Fournier said. “It hasn’t been the greatest situation.”

Councilors, while supporting the proposal in concept, told Muzzy and MMHC the proposal would need to be more formal before it would be considered for approval.

“You have some loose ends,” Councilor Mary Mortier said, “and those will need to be tied up.”

Among the loose ends Mortier spoke of, a formal rendering of the proposed space would be needed, along with a detailed description of how the space would be used. Those would be required for the Planning Board, where a zoning change will be required for the proposal to move forward.

Belfast General Assistance Administrator Kristy Osgood added to the list of loose ends by telling Muzzy her office would need more evidence that MMHC could financially support the facility, as well as a description of the services the facility and its partners would provide.

Some on the council, as well as Fournier, were concerned with the impact on city services.

“Any facility like this is going to cause an uptick in services required by emergency people,” Fournier said.

Sullivan countered by saying the stability provided to families in transitional housing would reduce the need for emergency services.

“These families are constantly moving [from place to place],” Sullivan said. “They are in crisis all the time.” She told the council the stability provided by transitional housing would mean children would be in school more frequently and that the services provided would offer a foundation for dealing with other developmental issues.

Waldo County Public Health Nurse Susan Dupler seemed to sum up the general feeling towards the MMHC proposal.

“I think this is a great idea,” she said, “but I think it needs a little more tweaking.”

Councilors were curious about the screening process, how many volunteers would be supporting the facility, and to what level those volunteers were trained.

Mortier offered to attend MMHC’s next board meeting, along with a representative from Planning and Codes, to assist the group in formalizing the proposal.

City Manager Erin Herbig noted that Planning Board intervention would be necessary to make any zoning ordinance changes.

MMHC will return with its formalized proposal at the next council meeting. Mortier said the proposal represents a unique pilot program.

“I think this project has the opportunity to be a fabulous trial [program] for Belfast,” she said.

The next meeting of the Belfast City Council will be Jan. 21.

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