

Unhoused campus finds its footing

Emergency calls are down, nearly 40 people have transitioned to permanent housing

BY JOHN AGUILAR

JAGUILAR@DENVERPOST.COM

The Aurora Regional Navigation Campus has been through a rough patch.

Since its opening last November, a cascade of challenges has plagued the 640-bed homeless facility, which acts as a one-stop shop for those seeking shelter and help getting back on their feet. Moldy rooms, plumbing problems with attendant smells and horrors of raw sewage, a shortage of case managers and hundreds of calls to police.

The bulk of the former Crowne Plaza Hotel that houses the navigation campus is closed for remediation, temporarily eliminating a whole level of care for people showing the most progress on their road to stability.

Things got off to a bad start so quickly that the head of the organization that operates the navigation campus, Advance Pathways, told city leaders just two months after its debut that “we weren’t ready” to open the facility.

As long ago as mid-January, one of Aurora’s City Council members asked staff if the city could cancel the campus contract if things didn’t improve.

Ultimately, the contract with Advance Pathways wasn’t nixed. And now, nine months to the day since the navigation campus was opened, things are on the mend. Fewer 911 calls are being made from the facility (emergency calls dropped 24% from the first quarter of 2026 to the second), more case managers are on duty and some of the most egregious physical issues with the building have been addressed.

As of June 30, 39 people have been moved to permanent housing since the facility opened on Nov. 17. An average of anywhere from 240 to 280 people spend the night at the Aurora Regional Navigation Campus.

The campus served nearly 26,000 meals in April, with that number climbing to nearly 35,000 in June. But there is still work to be done, said Stephanie Keiper, Aurora’s manager of homelessness and behavioral health.

“Any new program is going to need time, and it’s going to have kinks,” Keiper said. “We knew as we were opening the building, we’d have to do some pivoting. We knew some things were at end of life.”

Aurora bought the defunct hotel at East 40th Avenue and Chambers Road in 2024 and renovated it over the next year — spending a total of \$40 million. With winter coming on, there was an urgency to have a place for the city’s homeless population to seek shelter.

The Metro Denver Homeless Initiative’s annual Point in Time survey revealed an increasing number of people unhoused in Aurora this year. In its one-night survey in January, the organization counted 832 homeless people in the city.

That was up from 626 last year and 697 in 2024.

Despite inspections, problems with the 45-year-old building didn’t reveal themselves right away, Keiper said. Once people started using the facility full force, the weaknesses became apparent.

“We’re not going to see what the plumbing is doing when people aren’t flushing several times a day,” Keiper said.

Incentive-based tier system

(1)

The Aurora Regional Navigation Campus is structured on a unique incentive-based model. Its approach consists of three tiers, with each level more desirable for the client to reach.

The first tier is made up of nearly 300 cots, divided by sex. There are lockers for personal belongings and shared bathrooms. Anyone is welcome. The next tier, which is physically separate from the first, features an array of 114 compartmentalized, open-air cubicles with proper beds and lockable storage.

Tier II residents are assigned case managers to help them manage personal challenges and get on the path toward landing a job. Jim Goebelbecker, executive director of Advance Pathways, said movement between Tier I and Tier II has improved since the winter.

"It is smoother now than it was three, four, five months ago," he said.

At Tier III, a resident gets to live in one of the former hotel's 255 private rooms. To earn a spot in this highest level, the person must have a full-time job and pay a third of their income to the program. Residents in this tier will typically remain at the facility for up to two years before they have the skills and stability to find housing on the outside, Goebelbecker said.

But with Tier III's rooms in need of mold remediation, Goebelbecker worries about the continuity the program is supposed to provide.

"How do we keep the spirit of that Tier III pathway alive and reasonably available during the renovation period?" he said. "It interrupts the flow."

Crews have been hired to make the rooms fit for occupancy, and Keiper said floors in the six-story building will come online in a staggered fashion, with the first floor expected to open by October. She expects the entire building to be fully operational by sometime in 2027.

Aurora hasn't determined the full cost of the renovation but has earmarked \$1 million in its capital projects fund this year to pay for the work. The city has also budgeted \$500,000 this year — and in each of the next three years — for maintenance at the campus.

"We were building the plane while we were flying it," Keiper said of the campus' early problems.

Eyes on from the city

Aurora Councilwoman Alli Jackson, chair of the city's Housing, Neighborhood Services and Redevelopment Committee, would like to see a little less flying blind when it comes to the navigation center.

"We've got to have measurable goals to be able to say we're doing what we say we're doing," Jackson said. "In six months, we're going to check back in and see if these goals have been met."

Last week, the City Council passed a resolution that aims to keep a closer eye on the goings-on at the navigation campus. Specifically, the measure aims to "establish performance metrics, accountability standards and reporting expectations" at the campus.

There are also several requirements included in the measure: a minimum number of medical respite beds — 15 to 20 by next summer — for homeless adults. Staff at the navigation campus will be required to complete training in conflict resolution, crisis prevention and de-escalation and trauma-informed care.

City leaders stated they would like to see case management ratios at the facility consistently upheld, with a target of one manager for 30 residents on the emergency side of the operation and one manager per 15 residents on the transitional housing side.

The resolution also asks the Aurora Regional Navigation Campus to provide the city on a quarterly basis with the number and percentage of clients engaged in case management, navigation services and employment services.

That's an area that has gotten Jackson's attention. Service providers, be it in the areas of mental health, workforce opportunities or criminal justice case management, haven't been able to operate at an optimal level at the campus.

"They don't know what room they're supposed to be in and who they are supposed to be seeing," she said. "It's disorganized."

Goebelbecker said 210 residents engaged with case managers from April through June. Overall, the navigation campus has agreements with 30 service providers, and four of them hold regular hours on campus, including the HEART (Housing, Employment, Addiction, Recovery and Teamwork) Court and Stride Community Health Center.

Stride's presence at the building has been critical in reducing emergency calls, Goebelbecker told city officials at a Housing, Neighborhood Services and Redevelopment Committee meeting in July. He produced a bar graph that showed a striking correlation between Stride's operating hours at the campus and a reduction in 911 call activity.

'It's a rough night'

Aurora Mayor Mike Coffman hopes the navigation campus can add an on-site mental health provider, perhaps an extension of Stride's medical services.

The mayor has likely kept the closest eye on the facility amongst his colleagues since it opened nine months ago, even if his eyes are closed for the bulk of the time he spends there. Coffman has been sleeping on a Tier I cot at the facility every Friday since February.

He speaks to residents in the afternoon and then tries to get some shut-eye, even as people around him talk deep into the night. He's lucky if he gets six hours of sleep.

"It's a rough night," Coffman said of the overnight experience at the campus. "If one dog starts barking, God help us."

Then he's up before dawn helping make breakfast for the residents.

"It's people who are just off the street or who have just lost their housing," Coffman said. "They know I'm there every Friday afternoon to talk to."

Despite the hiccups of the first few months of the navigation campus' operation, Coffman fully believes in the incentive-based model Aurora is following. It may be a little while before results are achieved, the mayor said, given the complicated addiction and mental health challenges faced by many of the residents the city is trying to help.

Coffman wants the residents he sees weekly to "achieve their highest level of self-sufficiency."

"If you look at other programs, they are just warehousing people," he said. "I think this program will be a model for the country."

