

Denied State Funding, Vernon Shelter May Close



The Tri-Town Shelter in Vernon.

May 12, 2015, 6:42 pm



By Jesse Leavenworth

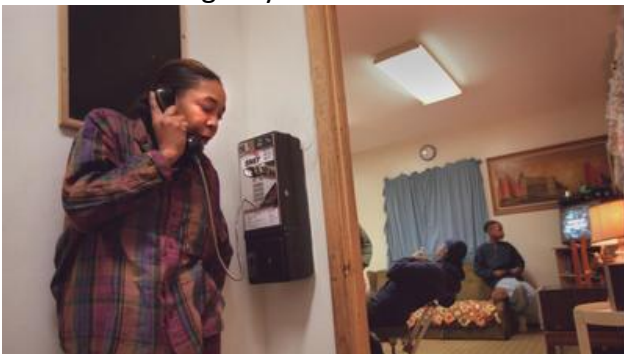
VERNON — A second homeless shelter may have to close after the state denied funding for the next fiscal year, but state and local officials offered differing reasons.

Leaders of the Tri-Town Shelter in Vernon are doing all they can to maintain the 15-bed facility, Executive Director Pieter Nijssen said Tuesday, but the expected funds from the state represented 43 percent of the shelter's \$316,000 annual budget.

"If we are not able to find an alternative, there is a probability that we would have to close," Nijssen said.

The Manchester Area Conference of Churches Charities recently announced the closing of its 40-bed shelter in Manchester as of July 1. Like the MACC shelter, the Tri-Town Shelter has a long-standing policy of not admitting people who are actively using alcohol or drugs.

MACC leaders have said they decided not to accept state and federal funding for fiscal year 2015-16 rather than follow an admissions model called "Housing First" that says a client's lack of sobriety should not be a barrier to emergency shelter.



A Courant file photo from the Tri-Town Shelter in Vernon.
(Tom Brown / Hartford Courant)

Nijssen said Tri-Town's admission policy may have been a contributing factor in the denial of funding, but state Department of Housing Commissioner Evonne M. Klein said the policy was not an issue in the decision.

"Tri-Town did not receive funding from the state due to their score on our rating and ranking criteria, and as a result, the department never discussed the Housing First requirements with them," Klein said.

The rating system, available on the department's website (www.ct.gov/doh), includes sections on a shelter's financial management, scope of services and staff-to-client ratio. Klein did not specify Tri-Town's deficiencies on the scoring system. Nijssen said the only explanation he heard was a warning from state officials last year that fewer grants would be awarded in the next fiscal year.

Tri-Town's board of directors is now focused on surviving the loss of \$135,000 in expected state revenue, he said. Plans include fundraising and a possible merger with another agency that serves a similar population, Nijssen said.

Founded in 1984, the shelter serves men, women and families. Although named for the three towns of Vernon, Ellington and Tolland, the shelter admits people from throughout the region, Nijssen said. Tri-Town is serving more children than ever before — 57 last year — and the safety of shelter clients is a main reason for continuing to screen clients for sobriety, he said.

Nijssen echoed MACC leaders who said they have maintained a dry shelter because of concerns about active substance-abusers' influence on recovering clients.

If Tri-Town cannot raise adequate funds, the shelter could close by the end of July, Nijssen said. Other shelter operators in the region said they have been discussing how to handle a likely influx of more clients.

"There's a concern that when you close 60-odd beds, where do they come?" said Marilyn Rossetti, executive director of the Open Hearth shelter in Hartford. "Those people don't disappear."

The other homeless shelter in the immediate area is the East Hartford Community Shelter. Run by the Community Renewal Team, the 40-bed shelter serves men, women and families, CRT spokeswoman Nancy Pappas said. CRT leaders also are discussing the effects of the MACC shelter's closing and the possible closing of the Tri-Town shelter, Pappas said.

The East Hartford shelter expects to receive state funding in the next fiscal year, she said. The shelter, Pappas said, is committed to following the Housing First model, which advocates say has been successful throughout the nation in getting people off the streets and into permanent housing.

"Simply said, Connecticut has been recognized as a national leader in our efforts to end homelessness," Klein said. "And we've been making great strides on this front, because we have implemented national best practices."