

Mesa faith leaders demand action on homeless hotel plan

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Mesa must move ahead with homeless hotel plan, faith leaders say

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- Mesa community and faith leaders are urging the City Council to approve funding to furnish a converted hotel for transitional housing.
- The future of the Sunaire Hotel project is uncertain due to a shift in the City Council's makeup after a recent recall election.
- If the project is canceled, the city may have to return millions in pandemic relief funds used for the hotel's purchase and renovation.

Church leaders and Mesa residents are pleading with the City Council to take the last step needed to open a converted hotel into transitional housing.

The nonpartisan organization Valley Interfaith Project stood outside of Mesa City Hall and demanded that the City Council approve a purchase contract that would furnish the Sunaire Hotel. The city bought the hotel to continue its Off the Streets program.

It was created in 2020 as a 90-day temporary transitional housing program using \$1.75 million a year of COVID-19 relief funds to rent rooms at the Windemere Hotel on Main Street and Recker Road.

In 2023, the council narrowly approved the purchase of the Sunaire Hotel in a four-to-three vote and renovated the hotel for the new purpose.

But the makeup of the seven-member City Council has changed, casting more doubt on its support for the project.

The three council members who voted against the project in 2023 remain on the council. Freshman Councilmember Dorean Taylor, who represents the area where the hotel is located, replaced former Councilmember Julie Spilsbury in a [special recall election](#).

Taylor ran on her opposition to the program, which was cited in petitions to force the recall vote a year after Spilsbury won reelection with two-thirds of the vote.

On March 5, the city council is expected to receive an update on the project and could provide staff with directions about the future of the hotel. They could direct staff to bring forward a vote to finish the hotel at its March 9 meeting or tell staff to seek options to lease the property to nonprofits to provide emergency shelter services.

The Valley Interfaith Project gathered to showcase how faith leaders and members are working in their communities and how the program could help residents experiencing homelessness.

Growing up, Jessica Mueller experienced homelessness and said she wished a program like Off the Streets had been around for her family to participate in. She attended Mesa Public Schools and couch surfed in Apache Junction. Her brother rode his bike 21 miles to go to Dobson High School, she said.

"Eventually, we found stability, but not in Mesa. We had to leave to find it," Mueller said. As an adult, she came back to Mesa because she believed the community was capable of protecting its residents.

"These programs are necessary and these programs work," she said.

Heidi Thomas, a leader with the VIP housing team and Mesa resident, said in an interview the city should "complete the work that they've started."

"It's the right thing to do both morally and financially," she said.

The total cost of acquisition and renovation was \$13.2 million. The [city used American Rescue Plan Act funds](#), including \$4 million from Maricopa County's allocation. The city council approved an agreement with the county that the city would use the hotel as an emergency shelter for a minimum of 10 years.

The city would have to return the \$4 million to the county, according to the agreement. It was unclear if or how the remaining \$9.2 million would need to be returned to the federal government.

However, the ongoing maintenance costs will begin to fall on the city now that pandemic relief funds are nearly gone. Moving forward, the city anticipates it would cost the city \$2.5 million annually to operate the program. That would be made up of the general fund, federal grants and interest earned on the ARPA funds.

Religious leaders say they don't have the means to do what the city can

Will Moore, a VIP Leader at Red Mountain United Methodist Church, last summer helped volunteer and open a cooling center at a former church property just a mile away from the Sunaire Hotel.

He said he was recruited to open the respite center to provide services on the east side of the city after Mesa and the county asked for it. His church helped provide nearly 1,000 volunteer hours of members working from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

He said he saw people who had behavioral issues but other people were working jobs but living in their cars because they didn't have an affordable house.

"We were, as a church, able to provide that kind of service and work closely with the city, with the police (and) with other city staff. But what we couldn't do and can't do is provide emergency housing," he said.

Rev. Sarah Oglesby-Dunegan of Valley Unitarian Universalist in Chandler said her church partners with an agency to provide a sleeping space four to six times a month. That group of 20 to 25 people rotates to other churches on different days, she said.

"We provide a meal and people sleep on the floor," she said. It's not a permanent solution, and the middle piece between sleeping on a church floor to find permanent housing "doesn't really exist" in metro Phoenix, she said.

Mesa's Off the Streets program "meets a need that I think is really important for us to be thinking about and modeling," she said.

Addressing homelessness is a "shared work" between the nonprofits and the city, Oglesby-Dunegan said.

For Oglesby-Dunegan, Thomas and Moore, the city's program is a proven success that shouldn't go away.

How many people has Mesa's program served?

Since May 2020, the city has served nearly 3,300 people.

In 2025, it served 489 people who stayed in the program for a median of 70 days, according to the city's data.

The data indicated that 86% of clients had a positive exit rate.

See our in-depth coverage: [After 'The Zone,' growing unhoused population in Arizona eclipses efforts to help](#)

Seventy-six percent of clients were families, 29% were domestic violence survivors and 6% were seniors.

Of those served in 2025, 174 people left the hotel and went to a homeless shelter, 53 got housing with a voucher or support and 44 returned to homelessness, the city's data showed.

Others found housing with a friend or family, self-paid for housing without support, or went to a medical or long-term care facility.

If the city moves forward with opening the Sunaire Hotel, it would move the program out of the Windemere Hotel and begin operations at the new location in the summer.

Is there something under construction you'd like to tell us about or find out more about? Contact reporter Maritza Dominguez, who covers Mesa, Gilbert and Queen Creek can be reached at maritza.dominguez@arizonarepublic.com or 480-271-0646. Follow her on X, formerly Twitter: [@maritzacdom](https://twitter.com/maritzacdom).