

theBerkshireedge

news & ideas worth sharing

Home › News › Pittsfield's day center...

Pittsfield's day center for those experiencing homelessness, The First, nears opening

Written by [Leslee Bassman](#)

August 25, 2025



Pittsfield's Zion Lutheran Church is readying for the opening of The First, a day-use resource center for those experiencing homelessness. Photo by Leslee Bassman.

Pittsfield — It is all hands on deck as The First, a community resource center for those experiencing homelessness, nears the finish line in its allocated space in the basement and second floors of [Zion Lutheran Church of Pittsfield](#), 74 First Street.

And, between the city of Pittsfield, [ServiceNet Inc.](#), [Hearthway Inc.](#) (formerly known as Berkshire Housing Development Corporation), and a plethora of local supporters, there are a lot of hands contributing to the endeavor.

The First will provide a daytime place for individuals who are housing insecure so their basic needs are met, including access to showers, laundry, and phone chargers, said the project's lead, Hearthway CEO and President Eileen Peltier. The [nonprofit organization](#) offers affordable-housing options throughout the Berkshires. "The aspiration associated with The First is really that we create community connection for both the individuals who are housing insecure and for the community we hope will participate with them and be in that space," Peltier said.

Zion's second floor will transition into nine permanent housing units for individuals exiting homelessness while its basement will become a Housing Resource Center (HRC) for day use with showers, laundry, a kitchen, a lounge area, lockers, and a meeting space. Those areas will have separate entrances from the church entrance, with the structure's first floor reserved for church use and common-room events. "This is a space where all are welcome to and encouraged to come over, have a cup of coffee, sit and have a conversation with someone that you might not typically speak with," Peltier said. "Be a part of it."

For Peltier, The First meets a need that exists in many communities in Pittsfield and beyond. "The increase in people experiencing homelessness over the past several years is really concerning, and there are not a lot of options for individuals to access housing that is both affordable and safe and appropriate," she said of local and national statistics. "We have far too many people who are living with that experience."

The First differs from traditional shelter systems that provide such individuals with overnight lodging, while daytime use is limited and "not necessarily where somebody wants to spend all of their time," Peltier said. "So, having an option like The First for both individuals who are utilizing the shelter or people who are couch surfing or living in their cars—it gives them a place to be to feel safe, have their needs met, connect," she said. "Importantly, the message of The First is 'you're worthy and we care as a community.'"

How The First came to be

Peltier credits the collaborative project to "a little bit of synchronicity."

Hearthway and church leaders got together a few years after the latter's event space, The Common Room, was developed, with the idea of devoting a portion of

the building to a community program. According to Peltier, her team met with then-Pittsfield Mayor Linda Tyler who was familiar with The Living Room Model that incorporates a supportive resource center as a way to build community. She said Tyler then asked Peltier to look for possible locations that might be viable for such a use. "And Zion came right to mind because it is an ideal space," Peltier said. With its 40 beds, The Pearl shelter opened across the street last year.

In 2022, the church assembly approved a Memorandum of Understanding with Hearthway covering the project, with a final vote affirming the leases and authorizing its financing—that includes other building improvements—on October 20, according to [Zion's website](#).

The idea for the program is not novel to Peltier, who said she considered embarking on such a project over the course of her two-decade career. "To me, it's not a new need or a new challenge—people who are experiencing homelessness is absolutely not a new challenge," she said. "We're just very fortunate that we were able to bring the funding and critical key partnerships together to make it happen."

Nuts and bolts of the program

Hearthway Real Estate Development Associate Chris Willett puts total renovation costs for the project at just under \$3 million, with the resource center sized at slightly below 8,000 square feet.

[Allegrone Companies](#), the contractor for construction, began the project's buildout in late 2024, and The First's HRC is slated to open around October 15, with its nine apartments ready for tenants next month, Peltier said. Individuals are referred to Hearthway from a regional Continuum of Care entity as potential residents for the living units and vetted through a state- and nationally accepted process that prioritizes individuals with the most critical need and best fit for those apartments, she said.

The project's floor plan can be found [here](#), courtesy of Hearthway Inc.

Under [the terms of the agreement](#), Zion will continue to own the building, leasing the HRC to Hearthway for 20 years and the apartments for 60 years. The church will receive \$260,000 for the first-floor construction and another \$50,000 to offset other project costs such as moving and storage, design, and attorney fees. The HRC will pay Zion rent of \$1,000 monthly for years 11 through 20 of the Hearthway contract.

A community of community

Northampton-based ServiceNet, a nonprofit organization operating across western Massachusetts offering mental health and human services support, will provide staffing and programming for the HRC's operations, including case management.

Over the course of its first year, an estimated 100 to 200 individuals will be using the HRC, with a staff of three members to cover seven days a week of service, ServiceNet Director of Communications and Development Amy Diehl said. The group also operates The Pearl. "We're definitely looking to serve anyone who's feeling housing insecure, who needs those resources, who's looking for that community," she said. "It can also just be people who may have housing but are very isolated."

The collaborative project, especially its shelter and housing aspects, joins ServiceNet with The First's sponsoring partners: Berkshire Health Systems (\$300,000 over two years), MountainOne, Berkshire Bank, Greylock Federal Credit Union, Pittsfield Cooperative Bank, and MOLARI Employment and HealthCare Services. An anonymous donor is matching up to \$60,000 in individual contributions that the donor "wanted to come from the community," Diehl said. "It's been an absolutely phenomenal response from the community," she said. "It's clear that this is something people recognize as a need in the community, and they're really stepping up to make it happen."

While project funding has been secured by American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) monies, other local avenues have contributed to the remaining project costs, including operating costs.

According to Diehl, fundraising efforts are currently going towards two years of staffing costs, creating a pilot program "that works best for Pittsfield" as well as possibly launching in other locales. "[The First] is very much a missing piece in the current shelter and housing opportunities in Pittsfield," she said. "We're looking at staffing, but I believe all of the collaborative partners are really looking at ways to get the community involved. I think whenever that happens, we break down stigma, we create relationships, and we move closer to the stability we're all looking for."

[Hot Plate Brewing Co.](#) owners Sarah Real and Mike Dell'Aquila reached out to Peltier about coordinating a fundraiser for The First last week, with about 60 supporters in attendance and marking a part of the matching donation to the

project. "They were excited, energized, and it was a wonderful evening for everyone there," said Peltier of the brewery guests who contributed through suggested donations, a tag sale, and donations of \$1 per pint sold during the evening. "But, for me, personally, having wanted to create an offering like this for a long time, it felt really good to see the community saying, 'Yes, this is what we need right now.'"

The goal now is to raise \$600,000 for 48 months of operating costs, Diehl said. With matching donations and monies pledged, the team is "already 75 percent of the way there," she said.

"We really are looking for folks who are passionate to help us close that final gap," Diehl said. "It's so small now and we know the support is there."

To make a donation to The First, click [here](#).