

Housing Iowa Award Nomination - COVID-19 Housing Response City of Sioux City Satellite Office

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the City of Sioux City (City) knew that action had to be taken in order to serve those experiencing homelessness effectively while also protecting staff. The City was committed to following CDC guidance which meant offices remained open to the public for the first few weeks of the pandemic. As the pandemic progressed, City Hall was eventually closed to the public and half of employees began working from home. Around this time, the local seasonal homeless shelter closed their doors a few weeks early due to the pandemic. City staff were then faced with the challenge of serving the public without an accessible office as well as increasing street outreach efforts to serve those with no emergency shelter and nowhere else to go. Staff needed to rethink the way everything was done to respond to the increased housing need while moving people off the streets as quickly as possible to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The first action that was taken included starting a partnership with local hotels to temporarily house as many persons experiencing homelessness as possible. Staff connected each person to coordinated entry, if they had not already, so they could continue moving forward on their journey to permanent housing. Bus tickets were also provided to those that had family support in another community that communicated a willingness to receive them. The rapid rehousing program was then expanded to place as many people from the hotel in apartments as quickly as possible.

Working literally on the streets highlighted the importance of creating an innovative satellite office where those experiencing homelessness could have easy access to our staff while providing as much protection as possible from COVID-19 exposure. It was determined that the satellite office needed to be street level, secure, and in a convenient location for those requiring services. The search led us to the Martin Luther King Ground Transportation Center (MLK), located in downtown Sioux City at 5th and Nebraska Streets (521 Nebraska Street). The building houses the City's public transportation system and the Greyhound Bus terminal. Many people experiencing homelessness frequent the bus terminal for their transportation needs. MLK is also connected to the City's skywalk system, which is used by many to walk to their destination as an alternative to walking outdoors in the elements. MLK is only three blocks way from the seasonal homeless shelter, three blocks away from the hotel serving as the emergency shelter, and six blocks away from the coordinated entry site.

The office space we selected at MLK in the summer of 2020 was a big, open, space with an aggressive color scheme, worn carpet, and no interior offices (see attached photos). CDBG-CV and ESG-CV funding was used to develop the office into usable space. The area was divided into a reception area, a kiosk area, seven offices, and a conference room. The area was transformed using a calming color scheme and LED lighting (see attached photos). A total of five staff moved into offices at this location including case managers, a housing navigator, and administrative support in October 2020. Many positions are supported with CDBG-CV and ESG-CV funding. There is room to grow as programs continue to expand.

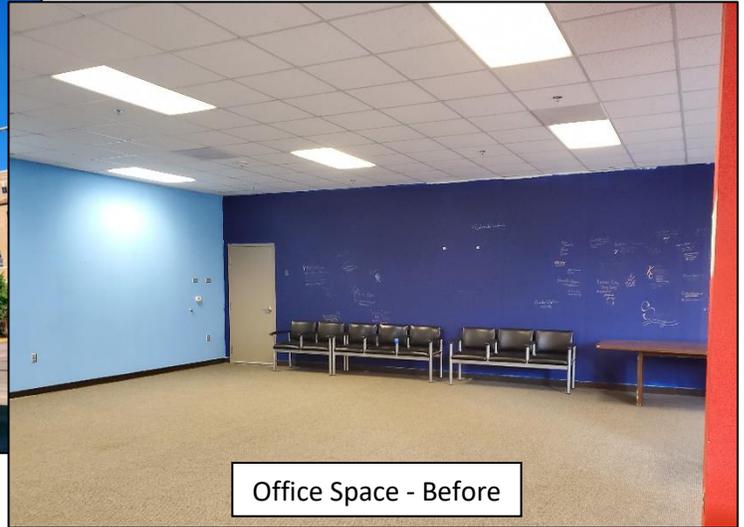
The benefits of this innovative satellite office are listed below:

1. The office is secure and there is a video doorbell intercom system that allows staff to assist those stopping by without having to have direct personal contact. Anyone looking for assistance can ring the bell to receive the phone number / directions to coordinated entry, where to find food, where to find immediate shelter, etc. We are able to assist them promptly via the intercom system.
2. A kiosk is available for our rapid rehousing clients to apply for personal identification documents, Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers, employment, etc.
3. Anyone referred to the City's rapid rehousing program will meet with their case manager and the housing navigator in this convenient location without having to navigate their way through a large government building.
4. The housing navigator's office is located in this space, allowing ease of communication between case managers, the housing navigator, and clients.
5. A standalone security deposit program is offered at MLK for anyone that has already found housing on their own but does not have the funds available for a security deposit.
6. A conference room is available to meet in person with clients in a socially distanced manner. A computer screen is available for staff to participate in Zoom meetings.

The personal connection we are able to make with our clients is forever changed as a result of the move to MLK. It is a more intimate space removing any fear of judging eyes while making their way through a busy lobby of an unfamiliar government building. This move to MLK has allowed us to build a deeper trust with those experiencing homelessness in an effort to find the actual root cause of their homelessness, remove those barriers, and transition them to permanent housing. Since the pandemic began, 69 households consisting of 155 people have been temporarily housed through the emergency shelter hotel program and 64 households consisting of 77 people have been housed through the rapid rehousing program.



MLK Building



Office Space - Before



Kiosk



Conference Room



View from Front Door