

## **Durango School District Superintendent Karen Cheser's remarks to Durango City Council on Oct. 21, 2025, regarding the proposed warming shelter at Sacred Heart Catholic Church Parish Hall:**

Good evening, Council Members. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you tonight.

I'm here representing the Durango School District and, most importantly, the students, staff, and families of Park Elementary School. I want to begin by acknowledging something we all share: compassion for our neighbors experiencing homelessness. Everyone deserves warmth, dignity, and support—especially during our harsh winter months. The work you're doing to provide these essential services matters deeply, and we support that mission.

However, I must express serious concerns about the proposed location for the warming center—just 900 feet, two blocks, from Park Elementary School.

Over the past several years, Park Elementary has documented numerous troubling incidents involving individuals near campus. Parents and staff have reported people defecating on school property, engaging in sexual activity on school grounds, destroying student science projects, and sleeping on school steps and entrances. Staff have found needles, vape pens, and liquor bottles around campus. Students have been yelled at during recess. There have been break-ins, trespassing after hours, and adults attempting to engage with children on the playground. We have had to place the school on Secure/ lockdown numerous times because of various unsafe individuals around the school. These aren't isolated incidents—they represent an ongoing pattern that has created genuine fear among parents and placed tremendous strain on our staff, who are educators, not security personnel.

I want to be clear: we know that most people experiencing homelessness are simply trying to survive and pose no threat. But we cannot ignore the reality that concentrated services without adequate support infrastructure can create safety challenges—particularly near schools where our most vulnerable populations spend their days.

We've seen this play out recently in our own community. A warming center that didn't even operate as an overnight shelter generated seventy calls to police in just a couple of months. Seventy calls. That's nearly one per day. Now we're considering a facility even closer to an elementary school, and we currently have no clear action plan outlining how the city, district, and law enforcement will coordinate to ensure student safety.

Our district's first responsibility is protecting the physical and emotional well-being of every child. Parents trust us with their children each day, and that trust requires us to speak up when we see potential risks.

I'm here tonight with two respectful requests. First, we ask the Council to reconsider this location and work collaboratively with us to identify an alternative site—one that can still serve our

unhoused neighbors compassionately while maintaining appropriate distance from an elementary school. For example, some of the churches on Third Avenue that are not in close proximity to our schools might offer viable alternatives that could provide the same compassionate services in a more suitable location. There may be other locations as well that better balance community need with student safety.

Second, if this location moves forward, we need a comprehensive, written safety and response plan developed jointly with the school and district, City of Durango law enforcement, and shelter operators before the center opens. And this can't just rely on volunteers. And we do not have personnel to supervise the security. This plan must include dedicated law enforcement presence to ensure that our students who walk to school each day are not in harm's way. It must also address how we prevent the school, playground, and adjacent Fanto Park from becoming gathering spots while people wait for the warming center to open or during hours when the center is closed, or doesn't open for the evening. We need clear protocols, adequate security measures, defined response times, and regular communication channels. Our families deserve to know their children are protected.

We're not asking you to abandon compassion. We're asking you to extend that same compassion to 400 elementary school children who deserve to learn in a safe environment. There has to be a solution that honors both the dignity of people experiencing homelessness and the safety of our students.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I'm available to answer questions and committed to working together on a solution that truly serves our entire community.