

EAST METRO

Ramsey County's century-old Boys Totem Town closes for good

County commissioners, St. Paul's mayor, staffers and men who'd spent time there as youths gathered at the 72-acre campus to eulogize the place.

By Shannon Prather (<https://www.startribune.com/shannon-prather/188067161/>) Star Tribune |

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Boys Totem Town, Ramsey County's century-old residential facility for boys caught in the juvenile justice system, has closed for good.

County commissioners, St. Paul Mayor Melvin Carter, staffers and men who'd spent time there as youths gathered Wednesday at the 72-acre campus to eulogize the place, which saw its last few remaining residents depart on Aug. 1.

"It's a moment to celebrate and recognize we can do better by our kids," said Ramsey County Board Chairman Jim McDonough. "It's pretty traumatic to take a 14-year-old out of his home."

The future of the pastoral campus, just off Lower Afton Road in the Battle Creek neighborhood, has yet to be determined. Neighbors, who use it as a dog park and for hiking and skiing, have said they hope the site's "natural character" can be preserved. County leaders, who are interested in having the property generate taxes, have promised to discuss development prospects with local residents.

County officials decided to close the facility this spring, a result of declining juvenile crime and the recognition among prosecutors, judges and elected officials that troubled teens do better when they receive treatment at home and in their own communities. Totem Town's population, which once numbered more than 100, had dwindled to two by early summer as judges stopped sentencing juvenile offenders there.

Officials who spoke Wednesday thanked staffers who had dedicated their careers to working with youth in the program, while also praising new policies to keep children with their families and to treat all but the most extreme cases in the community. County leaders have spent years developing community-based treatment and therapy programs.

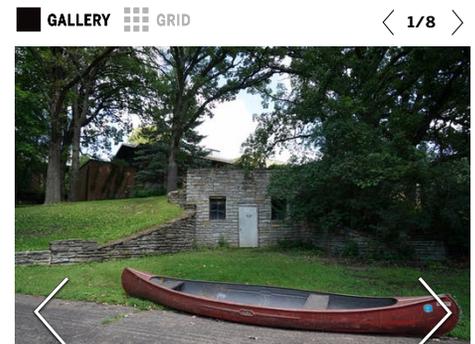
Ramsey County Commissioner Toni Carter, a vocal advocate for justice reforms and the mother of Melvin Carter, said the work to close Totem Town started with a community discussion beginning in 2005 to change how Ramsey County treated youth offenders and their families.

"So many wanted the same thing for our children — to do better, to progress, to have them be with their families and to be in school learning," Carter said. "This is what the journey is about, and it isn't over."

Paul Allwood, the county's deputy manager of health and wellness, recalled his first visit to Totem Town and a disheartening observation he made back then.

"All of the 15 kids here looked like me," said Allwood, who is black. "I wondered what happens to the kids who don't look like me. I walked away with a firm commitment that we can do better."

Mayor Carter said that closing Totem Town was a step in the right direction. Paraphrasing a quote often attributed to abolitionist Frederick Douglass, the mayor said that it was "easier — and I will add more cost effective — to build up our children than



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Boys Totem Town, the Ramsey County Home For Boys, opened in 1908 with 76 boys in residence. Officials say the home helped thousands of

to repair our adults once they are broken.”

Ramsey County spent about \$5.5 million annually to operate Totem Town, with most of that funding going to salaries. The staff of around 40 has been transferred to other positions in the county.

Totem Town opened in 1908 and operated as a farm for many years, with the boys providing the labor. The first 76 boys sent there were guilty of offenses including incorrigibility, vagrancy and trespass on the railroad. Their average age was 13.

The name Totem Town evolved from the practice, starting in the 1930s, of carving decorative poles out of the dead trees on campus. The previous name, Ramsey County Home for Boys, was officially changed to Boys Totem Town in 1957.

The campus and its philosophy changed with the times. Gerald Settles, Totem Town's interim assistant superintendent, said that in recent years the boys took part in boat making, gardening, a farmers market, schoolwork and sports via a partnership with St. Paul Public Schools.

“We wanted our kids to be part of the mainstream,” Settles said.

But Settles said he supported keeping teens with their families and focusing on therapy and rehabilitation, vs. the punishment mind-set that was prominent in the juvenile justice system a generation ago.

He added that the closing was bittersweet.

“A lot of boys said, ‘Thank God we were sent to Boys Town,’” Settles said. “They were on a road to destruction.”

Shannon Prather covers Ramsey County for the Star Tribune. Previously, she covered philanthropy and nonprofits. Prather has two decades of experience reporting for newspapers in Minnesota, California, Idaho, Wisconsin and North Dakota. She has covered a variety of topics including the legal system, law enforcement, education, municipal government and slice-of-life community news.

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