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Homeless people in the Twin Cities can help solve their own shelter, assistance and employment problems by organizing along the lines of other social movements, a leader of a national homeless group said Monday.

Ronald Daraby, vice president of the *National Union of the Homeless*, advocated the new approach in announcing plans to organize local affiliates of the 2 1/2--year-old group in St. Paul and Minneapolis.

A founding convention for the proposed St. Paul affiliate will be held Saturday at the St. Paul Labor Center, Daraby said at a press conference at the center. If all goes well, an organizing convention will be held in Minneapolis next month, he said.

The homeless union functions like a labor union, Daraby said. During a convention, members elect a board of directors, draft a constitution and create position papers on employment, housing, welfare and other issues that affect the homeless.

Within 30 days, members adopt an "action agenda." Then they visit local and state officials to explain union positions.

"We don't fear being locked up," Daraby said. "We haven't lost anything. In fact, when you lock us up, you give us what we don't have on the streets - namely three meals a day, a clean cot and health care."

The *National Union of the Homeless*, launched in Philadelphia in 1985, has 10 affiliates across the country and thousands of members, according to its literature. Its leaders are on a national tour, funded by the national Campaign for Human Development. The union will try to organize in about 10 more cities by next spring.

Its goal is to give the homeless a say in forming policies that affect them. It sets up a board of directors and organizes support from local labor leaders, educators and medical and other professionals to back up the board, they said.

There are an estimated 3,000 homeless in the Twin Cities, with about 1,200 in St. Paul, according to the mayor's St. Paul Overnight Shelter Board. Those figures, however, could be too low, according to Bret Byfield, housing supervisor of Exodus Housing of Catholic Charities, because they represent only the number of homeless people who can be sheltered.

Among the homeless appearing at the press conference was Rusty Redden, 31, of St. Paul. Redden said one of the most important issues in St. Paul is the lack of emergency shelter space (there are 343 beds available on a given night), lack of decent-paying jobs for those with minimum skills, and a shortage of job training.

Daraby cited several examples of success the union has had, including the defeat in Philadelphia of attempts to require the homeless to have permanent addresses before they could vote or receive welfare checks. The group also persuaded the city to keep its shelter referral office open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, he said.

A Los Angeles affiliate worked with city and county officials to run the Sante Fe encampment, a tent city that housed up to 900 people a day, according to a Los Angeles community development official, Bob Vilmur.

The union is financed by dues - \$1 for the homeless, \$5 for the employed - contributions, and grants, Daraby said.

"I hope they can overcome what other unions for the homeless have failed to do in the past, which is to

gain any deep groundswell of support," said Byfield. "So often homeless people are much more concerned about leaving behind their own state of homelessness rather than getting politically involved in the plight of homeless persons in general."