

Former rehabilitation center becomes homeless shelter

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DAYTON — A “gateway” shelter for homeless men will open soon in the former city jail that was renovated to serve this growing population.

The men will move Oct. 16 into the former Dayton Rehabilitation Center at 1613 S. Gettysburg Ave., which was known as the workhouse. Its new name is the Gettysburg Gateway for Men.

The 47,705-square-foot shelter will use all of the newer portion of the rehabilitation center, which was built in 1989 and closed in 2002 — plus an addition that contains classrooms and office space for case managers and social service agencies.

“I think it’s a good reuse of a facility that was vacant and not being used,” said Charles Meadows, co-chairman of the Homeless Solutions Policy Board, which for three years has been working on the community’s 10-year plan to end chronic homelessness and reduce overall homelessness. Meadows, a retired city official, previously served as superintendent at the workhouse.

The biggest contributor to the \$3 million project was Miami Valley Hospital, which paid \$1.5 million. Dayton, Kettering, Montgomery County and the University of Dayton covered the balance.

The men are currently housed with women and families in St. Vincent Hotel, 120 W. Apple St., which is often at capacity. Once the men move, St. Vincent Hotel will be renovated to better serve women and families. Leigh Sempeles, executive director of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul’s Dayton District Council, said Dayton is the only large city in Ohio that didn’t have separate shelters for men and women.

St. Vincent de Paul, which will operate both shelters, plans to launch a campaign in January to raise more than \$1 million to renovate St. Vincent Hotel. The number of family rooms will expand from seven to 25.

The homeless population is growing in Montgomery County and an initial look at the numbers indicates “the biggest increase is with families,” said Kathleen Shanahan, homeless solutions program coordinator at the Montgomery County’s office of Family and Children First. From January to June 2009, 545 family members were served by the office of Family and Children First. During that time in 2008 there were 372 family members served.

“There’s no question that the recession has had an impact,” said Joyce Probst MacAlpine, housing and homeless solutions manager in the county’s office of Family and Children First.

A walk through the men’s shelter reveals 24 former isolation cells have been converted to small, private rooms (each with a sink and toilet) for those homeless men with jobs. Other men will stay in dormitory style pods filled with beds.

The 178-bed shelter has a capacity for 60 additional mats for men who come in during extreme weather conditions.

Case managers from the Other Place will help the men find training or work as well as housing.

Sempeles estimates the shelter will cost \$1.2 million to operate annually, with funding expected to come from private donations, the county, city, human services levy and the state.

Probst MacAlpine said officials spent two years trying to find the best place for the men's shelter.

Tina Patterson, executive director of the Other Place, suggested officials consider the old workhouse after she swung by there one day to collect shoes and coats inmates had worn that might be used by the homeless.

The Gettysburg Gateway for Men facility and grounds have been leased by the city to CountyCorp, the county's nonprofit economic development arm, which pays \$10 a year, according to Kathy Emery, the city's community affairs manager.

Policy board members on Thursday approved a Good Neighbor Agreement between the board, county, city, police department, CountyCorp, St. Vincent de Paul, the Other Place, Southwest Priority Board and other neighborhood associations. They all agreed there will be rules on conduct and will alert neighborhood officials if any serious problems occur there.

St. Vincent and the Other Place also agree to give the neighborhood associations written postings of any job openings at the shelter.

Pineview Neighborhood Association member Herb Burton said he and others were initially concerned about neighborhood safety and potential negative impact the shelter could have on property values. But he now views it as a "valuable asset" to the area.

"There will be many challenges in the future, but I have faith that by working together we can solve any of the problems," he said.

While many homeless men congregate near downtown, Probst MacAlpine said they should have no trouble getting to the Gettysburg shelter.

"We're certainly aware that it's not close to downtown and transportation will be something we constantly have to work at," she said, noting there will be an RTA bus stop at the shelter.

Programs that help the homeless frequently provide bus tokens so clients can go to meetings for jobs, housing, mental health and other appointments. The Other Place also is coordinating outreach workers to make sure homeless men will get to the shelter.

Ultimately, the goal is to get them on the road to self sufficiency.

"Some of our transitional housing programs are really good at getting people into certificate program at Sinclair or even an associate's degree program," Probst MacAlpine said.

"People graduate with a real skill and leave the transitional housing program with something that will mean, hopefully, they'll never be homeless again."



Tom Dadisman (left) and Mike Wassenich from St. Vincent Hotel look over blueprints in the Gettysburg Gateway for Men shelter, which is set to open Oct. 16. Staff photo by Jim Witmer