

Homeless help design new center

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GREENSBORO — One block from The Depot, the new day center for the homeless, due to open in mid-October, will be a place to rest and stay warm, shower, wash clothes, get a haircut, look for work.

Also included will be a small feature — but a big deal — for people who walk the streets after night shelters close, carrying their belongings, getting stares from library patrons, fast-food diners and motorists.

What's the big deal? It's the two rows of little squares lining part of an architect's floor plan of the new day center: They mark where the men's and women's lockers will be.

"They don't have to wander around the streets of Greensboro with a pack on their back all day long," said Will Howard, an employment services specialist with the Interactive Resource Center, himself once homeless.

"It doesn't sound like a big thing to someone who's never experienced it. It's a great big deal, if a person could just take that pack off their back."

This time, heeding the voice of experience has been the marching orders in the move from the less-convenient East Bessemer location to the downtown day center in the old Southern Glass Building, donated by the Strasser family for this express purpose.

Originally, the city's \$300,000 grant to the IRC included \$30,000 to pay a consultant to map out how to spend the money, which is being supplemented by grants from the Cemala, Tannenbaum-Sternberger, and Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro.

IRC staff favored using that \$30,000 consultant fee for operations. By serving 80 homeless a day at a remodeled East Bessemer church, they argued, they had all the expert "consultants" they needed right in their day room.

Thus the plan that emerged for the 28,000-square-foot warehouse, redesigned by architect Micah Martin, has features that people who have never been homeless might not have come up with.

Example? There will be a sick room, for people who are ill and need to be inside, but don't need to spread their germs. Another example: a "quiet room."

"Nothing can bring down the energy level of a room more than someone who is zonked out in a chair," concedes Liz Seymour, the IRC's executive director. She nevertheless opposed a "no sleeping rule" for the center, recognizing that some homeless people have walked all night or traveled a long way to get there.

"It would have taken a consultant so much time to go out and find homeless people to talk to, ask the questions, come back with a report. But all this came out of one good discussion."

In another turn of the wheel away from dependence — on the part of the day center and the people it is meant to serve — the homeless are not limited to giving input; they will work on the project as well.

Two Saturdays back, gardening teams organized by businesses and community groups planted vegetables in the right-of-way along busy Murrow Boulevard.

The result will be a large edible garden that homeless guests will both work and harvest. And with 60 volunteers working the soil, using donated materials, plants, rations and supplies, Seymour reflected on what had become IRC's "Stone Soup" model for funding, borrowed from the preschool tale.

"This whole garden project cost us ..." she hesitated and thought a moment. "Well ... I bought some soap for the bathrooms. Actually, no money changed hands."

Realistically, it will take quite a bit of money to renovate the Southern Glass site — much of this will be covered by twin grants from the city and county of \$270,000 and \$275,000 respectively.

And although the private foundations have committed future grants, the IRC is still attempting to raise \$115,000. The roof needs replacing, and the plan calls for a plumbing upgrade for two men's showers and one women's shower.

Mostly, it is a matter of dividing the large warehouse into small spaces so that social workers and mental health professionals can meet privately with clients.

The palette of services that will be available to homeless people at a one-stop, central location is what completes the picture for such longtime advocates as Skip McMillan. An IRC board member, he began volunteering with the homeless when the Greensboro Urban Ministry night shelter was still located in a converted supermarket on Martin Luther King Jr. Drive.

"It's completed the puzzle — it's the missing piece," McMillan said. "We take care of the homeless every night, and every morning, we re-

create homelessness when we turn people back out on the street."

For Seymour, the sense of hopelessness suggested by the tag "chronic homelessness" lifted with the realization that all the goods, services and people needed to solve the problem were already in the community.

They just needed a stone to get together around. Two Saturdays ago, the stone was a vegetable garden. Today, it will be a cookout and a car wash.

"If we had to support all these programs that are going to be in here," Seymour said, looking down the list of housing advocacy, mental health, social services, veterans affairs and other agencies that will have workers at the new IRC, "this would not be very much money to work with.

"We can offer a very rich experience. But we also realize, this not the economic moment to say, 'We're here with our hand out, too.'"

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WANT TO HELP?

What: Car wash and cookout for Interactive Resource Center. Donations accepted. When: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. today Where: 407 E. Washington St., Greensboro Information: 332-0824 or <http://gsodaycenter.org>