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Community Family Center looks to build national model for services

Tara May Tesimu/Triblocal Staff Writer 03/15/10 11:34 AM 241 hits

The members of the [Community Family Center](#) committee in Highland Park have a vision.

They walk down the hallways of the old Karger Center basement with dilapidated floors and crowded halls that flood during rainstorms. But they envision a redeveloped center where the city's youngest children have room to spread out and play.

They peer into a storage room where social workers hold counseling sessions and crowded shelves are spilling over because there's no room anywhere else. But they envision ample, private office space for meetings about personal matters.

They talk about social workers who drive from building to building across Highland Park and Highwood to do their work and help families. But they envision one campus in the heart of downtown Highland Park where social service organizations could work in cooperation.

And they know there's a lot of work in front of them: millions of dollars in fundraising, for a start. But they envision a community that supports their cause and plan to meet-or at least come close to-that fundraising goal in 2010, begin construction in the fall and open in the summer of 2011.

The Community Family Center steering committee is a group of Highland Park and Highwood residents who have dedicated their time on a volunteer basis to build a family center in the heart of downtown Highland Park. The organization they plan would house a variety of maternity, infant, preschool, kindergarten and family service organizations, including Family Network, Family Service, Highland Park Community Nursery School and Day Care Center, the Highland Park/Highwood Home Child Care Association and the Tri-Con Child Care Center.

A decade in the making

The Community Family Center steering committee members began meeting about nine years ago-although at that time, they didn't have a name for themselves yet. Nor did they know exactly what they were working for or where they would build it.

They simply knew there was a need for more affordable child care services in Highland Park and Highwood. In 2002 and 2006, United Way assessment surveys showed that the community saw a need for more early education support-specifically affordable, non-religious child care.

"It's sorely needed," said Herbert Wander, an attorney who led the committee for much of its duration. "We've got these great agencies who do amazing work in sub-standard conditions. We need to take care of our young kids."

First, they began looking for a location. It needed to be near public transportation, accessible to everyone, near parks and schools. And there needed to be a lot of room. Then they started to hone in on the Karger Center, a 38,000 square foot building that houses the nursery school and day care center in its basement. It is located at 1850 Green Bay Rd. next to the Lake County Health Department North Shore Health Center. About 30,000 square feet of the building are unusable, either because it's unsafe or simply unfit for the public to congregate there.

Not a single member of the center steering committee could remember exactly how old the Karger Center was-a fact that only proved how much the building needs to be renovated, Community Family Center steering committee President Robert Baizer said.

"At least 60 years old," Baizer said. "None of us remember back further than that."

Then the committee went about garnering public support for its endeavor. North Shore School District 112, Township High School District 113, the city of Highland Park and the Park District of Highland Park all support the endeavor. The city has given the committee a lease of the former Karger Center for \$10 per year for 40 years.

"The city is fully supporting us," Baizer said. "We couldn't do it without that support."

The state, Moraine Township and Lake County have all promised financial support for the project if the full amount of the funds is raised. The committee aims to raise \$10.5 million in total for the building plus funds for operations and maintenance of the building. It has about \$2 million in support already pledged. In 2010, the committee members will meet one-on-one with community members to try to raise the rest of the funds.

"We're in what we call the quiet phase of fundraising," said David Ruder, a committee member, Northwestern University law professor and former chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission.

The Community Family Center is working with architectural firm Holabird & Root for preliminary designs and planning of the center. The firm is also working for the building to be LEED-certified, using sustainable strategies that include reusing an existing park district facility, creating a roof garden and making it accessible to public transportation.

The new center could serve at least 100 more children in the community, opening up spots on the long waiting lists for the child care centers Baizer said, and still allow room for expansion.

"There's a large underserved population here," Baizer said. "And it will be much more racially diverse when all these entities are consolidated. The environment will be so much better for learning. The synergies will be that much better among teachers, counselors and everyone involved.

"So more children will be served-and they'll be served better."

The [Community Family Center's honorary board](#) has some of the biggest names in early childhood education including Dolores Kohl Kaplan, founder of the Kohl Children's Museum, Bernice Weissbourd, founder of Family Focus, and Barbara Bowman, co-founder of the Erikson Institute, CEO of early childhood education at Chicago Public Schools and consultant to the U.S. Secretary of Education.

The steering committee members hope that the Community Family Center will serve as a national model for how social services could be provided.

"It is something the community would be proud of," Baizer said. "It would stand as a benchmark for social services. And it's something a city like Highland Park should have."

The steering committee itself has an impressive roster that includes the president emeritus of the United Way of Highland Park and Highwood, a Northwestern University law professor, two attorneys, a business executive, the coordinator of Right Start and an array of community volunteers.

Once the Community Family Center is built, the committee will continue to help support the building and the funds it needs, but each individual organization will continue to fund itself and individually run its own program.

"The Community Family Center will provide their homes-all we're doing is putting the roofs over their head," Baizer said. "And it will be to the benefit of all the programs to come together like this."

'Ready to grow'

Indeed, all of the programs are lending their verbal approval and support to the program.

The Highland Park Community Nursery School and Day Care Center program is located in the basement of the Karger Center that exists now and would be redeveloped into the Community Family Center. It offers healthy food cooked on-site for the children and all-day care and traditional preschool programs. Children are able to go sledding on the on-site hill in the winter and play in the vegetable or butterfly garden in the summer.

It's a strong program that is "beloved by our parents," Executive Director Jean Wallace-Baker said, but that could use upgrades it simply can't afford right now. She shares a small office down a crowded hallway. The basement floods sometimes, and the food from the kitchen sits on supply shelves in a room that doubles as the students' art room.

The program has a waiting list with more than 65 children on it, Wallace-Baker said. The expansion would allow her to take more children into the program.

"I'm just hoping we're able to pull together and do this," she said. "It's so important. There's so many more children we could be serving."

Family Network provides developmentally appropriate support for pregnant women and mothers of newborns and young children. It is housed in the basement of the Highland Park Presbyterian Church, 330 Laurel Ave.

"It would give us flexible space that we don't have now," Family Network Director Jordan Friedman said. "Space is hard to come by."

Because of the limited space, Family Network rents space in another building to house some of its offices. The Community Family Center would eliminate that extra cost and separation of employees. The single campus would also allow the organizations to share resources, therefore cutting costs and encouraging synergy among the entities.

"Having that one-stop shopping-that corridor of social services and programs in the same area-would be invaluable to our city," Friedman said. "It just makes perfect sense.

"We appreciate where we are now, but we could provide a lot better services if we were elsewhere."

Down the road, Tri-Con provides preschool education to children from 3 to 5 years old. It is filled to capacity with dozens of students on a waiting list. The expansion would allow them to serve many of the children on the list. It is located in the basement of Trinity Episcopal Church, 425 Laurel Ave., Highland Park.

"Most of the parents of the children who go here work all day," Tri-Con Executive Director Pamela Feinberg said. "They're the workers of the community. If

the kids weren't here, they would be in situations that aren't good for them. We can provide a good program, but there's more we can do.

"It's home, but we're ready to grow."

By [Tara May Tesimu](#) | Triblocal.com reporter

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Students play in their classroom at the Highland Park Community Nursery School and Day Care Center, which is located in the basement of the former Karger Center. Photos submitted by Community Family Center



Mothers chat and play with their babies at Family Network, which is located in the basement of the Highland Park Presbyterian Church, 330 Laurel Ave. Family Network would be one of the agencies moved to the new Community Family Center when it is built.



Tri-Con students show off their artwork. Tri-Con is located in the basement of Trinity Episcopal Church, 425 Laurel Ave. It is one of the organizations that would be moved into the Community Family Center when it is built.



Architectural firm Holabird & Root provides a rendering of what the outside of the Community Family Center would look like after it is built.



Architectural firm Holabird & Root provides a rendering of what the inside of the Community Family Center would look like after it is built.

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