

Caritas to undergo \$1.75M facility renovation

By Jessica Chia
Tribune-Herald staff writer

Caritas of Waco announced plans for a \$1.75 million renovation of its facility.

About half of the funds have been provided through a bequest from Edith Potter, a former Baylor University French professor, which the Caritas board of directors used to fund a challenge grant.

The agency hopes to raise the remaining \$800,000 through a capital campaign it's calling, "Caritas Cares."

The renovation project is a response to the financial troubles more Wacoans are experiencing in the current economic climate and will improve both the agency's capacity to provide service and the quality of its services.

"We're not trying to make an extravagant improvement here. We're really just trying to enhance our facilities at a basic level," said Buddy Edwards, director of Caritas of Waco.

The renovation project includes no plans to add to the building. The space to expand the

waiting room, pantry and warehouse will come from the relocation of the on-site thrift store at 300 S. 15th St.

"We're staying in the same building, but gaining another 4,000 to 5,000 square feet from the thrift store relocation," said Rabbi Gordon Fuller, president of the Caritas board of directors.

Edwards said those who come in at peak times must stand in the waiting room, which seats 50, a situation that creates an unpleasant environment for clients and impedes educational presentations.

The pantry and the warehouse, where staff and volunteers fill orders, are similarly cramped, Edwards said. The roomier workspace would speed up operations and accommodate more volunteers, he said.

Caritas will modify its existing freezer and cooler in the warehouse for better access and increased storage for donations, which are on the rise, Edwards said.

Caritas of Waco serves about 100 families a day, averaging just

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less than 2,000 families per month for the first five months of this year, said Edwards, who only expects numbers to increase in June.

The agency witnessed an increase in need when schools recessed for the summer because families whose children were enrolled in school lunch programs now

have more mouths to feed.

Waco Independent School District has 13,150 students enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program out of the 14,959 students in the district.

Although the bulk of the funding for the project came from the challenge grant, Caritas hopes to raise the remaining \$800,000 through a combination of foundation grants, corporate donations and funds raised from its capital campaign.

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Caritas expansion

A sad indicator of our economic times is the increase in those needing free food. So much so that the nonprofit organization Caritas of Waco is undergoing a capital campaign to increase its building space to serve more folks.

The \$1.75 million planned renovation of its Waco facility at 300 S. 15th Street will be funded in part by a \$750,000 grant from Edith Potter, a former Baylor University French professor, as well as an \$80,000 grant from the Community for Development.

We certainly hope the community will help pony up the remaining funds.

Renovations will expand the entranceway, waiting room, pantry and warehouse by relocating the on-site thrift store. That will enable the organization to gain an additional 3,500 square feet. And that will help them to help more people who are in need.

Caritas executive director Buddy Edwards tells us that educational seminars on nutrition and gardening will be offered in the expanded entranceway to

those waiting for free food.

That's a great use of new space and might help better educate those in need on how to eat healthily.

Since 2008, Caritas has seen a dramatic uptick in families needing free food. Demand has increased to 2,200 families per month, Edwards said, adding, "we've had lines out the front door and it's been extremely busy most days."

This summer has been exceptionally busy as children are home from school and families struggle to feed additional mouths. But may we remind readers that Caritas isn't the only place for free meals.

Summer feeding sites sponsored through the USDA are offered at 33 Waco ISD schools and area churches. On Tuesdays, parents also may eat meals at eight area sites for \$3, said Kenneth Moerbe, chairman of the McLennan County Hunger Coalition. And this will continue even after summer school ends next week.

We hope all who are in need will take advantage of this.