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Homeless advocates lay out plan, give glimpse of building

Coalition details six major goals

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A virtual version of the county's first safe haven for the homeless and mentally ill was revealed at a meeting where a regional coalition of advocates also laid out their 10-year plan to end homelessness in Macomb County.

The plan to eradicate homelessness was created by 70 stakeholders in Macomb, including politicians, parents, business owners and some of the homeless themselves.

It has six major goals: promoting an understanding of homelessness; addressing community barriers; increasing housing stock; performing street outreach to the homeless; educating the community about preventing relapses into homelessness; and engaging local decision makers in the process.

Carrie Fortune, continuum of care coordinator for Macomb County Community Services Agency, said she will give the audience time to spend Christmas with their families.

And then everyone has to get to work.

"We'll roll up our sleeves in January," Fortune said.

After discussion of the 10-year plan, ticket-holders for the Macomb Homeless Coalition annual dinner at Sycamore Hills Golf Club got a virtual walk-through of a \$3.2 million multipurpose building to serve the homeless. It's planned for property owned by the Macomb County Rotating Emergency Shelter Team on Little Mack, just north of Interstate 94, in Roseville.

The facility is named "Jack's Place" in honor of the brother of Jimetta Lewis, executive director of the Macomb County Rotating Emergency Shelter Team, or MCREST, in Roseville.

After suffering with mental illness for years, Lewis' brother killed himself in 1983 by carbon monoxide poisoning. He was found with his hand resting on the door of the garage where he had trapped himself, trying at the end to save his life.

"We knew there was some hope there, but it was a little too late," Lewis said.

To make sure it's not too late for others, Lewis unveiled plans for the building that would offer a variety of services under one roof, including a commercial kitchen to serve free meals, medical and dental clinics, mental health services, and branches of the Department of Human Services, the veteran's association, Michigan Works, and more.

The center would offer job training, legal aid and substance abuse counseling. If approved, it would be funded with grants and construction would start in March.

The building is pie-shaped with rows of offices on the outside surrounding a central drop-in center and kitchen.

"I may sound calm, but I'm so excited I can't stand it," said Lewis as she led about 200 people through the virtual tour of the facility.

The second floor of the 12,000-square-foot building would have one of only two safe havens in the state. The 25-bed facility would house men with severe mental illness with the goal of stabilizing them through two years of intense treatment.

The upstairs has simple individual sleeping rooms with desks; the rooms flank a library and meeting room. The basement would have a conference center, classrooms and storage for medical volunteers.

Roseville's Planning Commission must approve the plan before it is put before the City Council for final consideration. The plan is set for a public hearing Dec. 17.

"We all know how to work together," Lewis said. "We believe in this."

Local shelters have only 157 beds while Macomb County has 1,142 chronically homeless people and up to 3,500 a year who periodically have no place to stay, according to the Macomb County Continuum of Care. The numbers climbed from 899 in 2004 and 947 in 2005.

"Statistics are great for shock value, for grants, and as a way to distance yourself -- the fact is every single homeless person is a person," Fortune said.