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Homeless day care facility to open temporarily in Saranap

By John T. Miller



Smiles and signs of gratitude are displayed at former Trinity Center. Photo provided

In a flurry of activity near the end of July, the Trinity Center announced that the temporary quarters for its homeless day care facilities would be relocated to the old Sufi Center/Holy Ghost Hall in the Saranap area.

The Trinity Center, which is in the middle of a huge renovation project, had been using a building at 1271 So. California Blvd. in Walnut Creek since April while the construction is taking place. The building is owned by Hall Equities Group.

In mid-June, Trinity Center was notified that the lease at the Walnut Creek location could not be renewed. A search for another location began immediately. In July, Trinity Center was offered space at 1300 Boulevard Way. Unsure what permits were required, Donna Colombo, the executive director of the Trinity Center, contacted Walnut Creek Mayor Cindy Silva and County Supervisor Candace Andersen, who met in crisis mode.

HEG currently owns the old Sufi Center on Boulevard Way as part of the planned Saranap Village project and the facilities were offered as a temporary home for the Trinity Center, beginning in September and lasting until construction is complete, probably sometime near the end of November.

"Most everything we need is there and we don't need to do much with the space," said Colombo. "There's a community room, large restrooms with showers, a commercial kitchen and enough space to operate." Once the lease is negotiated with Hall Equities, Colombo plans on installing fences in the parking areas, an internet network, security cameras and some minor repairs.

Andersen contacted John Kopchik, head of the County Planning Department, who determined that the current zoning allowed this type of use for charitable activities to take place.

Andersen said, "As soon as we got the word, I had Donna publish some FAQs about the move and I informed both Saranap homeowner presidents David Dacus (Saranap Community Association) and Tim Lynch (Saranap Homeowners Organization) to get the word out to the community."

In an email reply to Andersen, Dacus said, "It seems appropriate and useful space, and a timely season of the year, when we give thanks for the abundance we enjoy, and consider those who find themselves without."

Lynch addressed the community via social media, saying, "Our community is an accepting and compassionate community of homeowners, renters and businesses. My hope is that we will be accepting of this temporary move to our neighborhood."

Lynch also visited most of the Boulevard Way businesses to notify them. "Their responses varied from surprise at not being notified prior to approval, to concerns for their clients, to resignation," he stated.

Many residents weighed in via social media with concerns about drug usage, safety, and their children sharing buses to and from school with the homeless population.

Colombo, who founded Trinity Center and has worked with this population since 2012, said, "The people who come to us are not criminals, or pedophiles. They are poor people who are down on their luck. There isn't anyone of them that I would be afraid of. I invite the neighbors to come and visit and see for themselves."

Trinity Center will also provide staff to monitor the bus stop immediately outside the temporary facility. Because of the distance, Trinity Center plans on running shuttle vans from downtown Walnut Creek to and from the site.

Three rules of conduct are enforced at the center, which include: respect for yourself and others; no aggression, verbal or physical; and no using of banned substances on the property. For violations there's a progression of actions from a one-day suspension to permanent suspension depending on the severity, according to Colombo.

The Trinity Center has 12 paid employees - four of whom were formerly homeless - and a pool of volunteers that include about four a day.

On average, 60 people visit the center per day, with about 20-30 onsite at any given time. It's open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., with women only on Wednesdays, from noon to 4 p.m. The facility offers services such as showers, laundry, food and clothing pantries, member advocacy and housing navigation services, support groups and programs, and many other vital resources.

The newly constructed facility located on Trinity Avenue--St. Paul's Common--cost in the neighborhood of \$20 million. In addition to a brand new building, it also includes 44 units of affordable housing.

A pair of informational meetings were held the week of Aug. 12, but Colombo says, "We are here anytime if people want to discuss a concern. We will hear it and we will do our best to address it."

Andersen adds, "Working with this population can be outside our comfort zone, but it's comforting when we can help others in need."

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