Catholic Charities makes big pitch for homeless center
By Tim Nelson
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Catholic Charities has purchased this trade union office building, just north of its Dorothy Day Center. It will be torn down to make way for a new homeless shelter. Tim Nelson | MPR News

Catholic Charities is kicking off a fundraising campaign Friday for a $100 million expansion of its Dorothy Day campus in downtown St. Paul, the charity's most ambitious effort ever to house the homeless.

Catholic Charities, which already has more than a third of the funds it needs for the expansion, is making a final push for the money to open a first phase next year.

Since it opened 34 years ago, the Dorothy Day Center has gone from a drop-in cafeteria for a few dozen homeless people to a living
space of last resort for hundreds of people a night.

But it is crowded. People sleep on foam mats inches apart, men and women separated by a row of stacked chairs.

"Right now, they're only allowed to have bunks and stuff for some of the women," said Jon Farrar, who has stayed at the center on and off for 17 years.

"Some of the older people have to sleep on the mats, too," Farrar said. "And man, I was watching the old people get up today, and I was like, 'I'm 53, but the old people? Man, how can they get up off the mat?' They wake up sore. Man, it's terrible."

They're the lucky ones. For the last four years, Dorothy Day has turned people away when the center is full, forcing some to camp outside nearby.

Catholic Charities aims to alleviate the space shortage by building a bigger shelter nearby. The new building will be modeled on Catholic Charities' Higher Ground facility in Minneapolis, a shelter that offers bunk beds and lockers, power outlets and upgrades to residents who can find work and pay to stay. A drop-in service center will replace the existing shelter that stands across the street from the Xcel Energy Center.

Tim Marx, president of Catholic Charities, said the organization's plans will transform the area near Sixth and Main streets in downtown St. Paul.

"Across the street, we will be beginning construction on Higher Ground St. Paul," Marx said recently from the corner. "After that is completed, the people that currently sleep at Dorothy Day and currently sleep at Mary Hall will move to Higher Ground."

A former trade union office building on the site will be torn down. The new building will have 278 shelter beds and have room for 193 more in apartments and other accommodations.

Marx said the meals and services available at Dorothy Day will move temporarily to Mary Hall, another Catholic Charities facility, and perhaps other places.

"[That] will allow us to demolish the current Dorothy Day and build that state-of-the-art connection and opportunity center, and above it will be four floors of what is really, really important: more housing," he said.

The project will include new space meant specifically for women, as well as a new program: supportive housing for homeless people being discharged from hospitals, but still in need of care.

It's an ambitious plan — bigger than anything Catholic Charities has tried before.

But the project already has some money in hand, including $5 million from the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation, and more than $3 million from other foundations, including $1 million each from the Fray and Pohlad family foundations. The state, Ramsey County, the city of St. Paul and other public sources have put in another $28 million, for about a third of the total project cost.

Ecolab CEO Doug Baker, one of three Twin Cities executives heading the campaign to raise private funding, said he does not think raising the necessary $40 million in private funding for the project will be a problem.

"That does not seem like a daunting number to me," Baker said, "particularly around this issue."

Joining him in the effort are Mary Brainerd, president and CEO of Health Partners and Andy Cecere, chief operating officer for U.S. Bank. Baker said housing the homeless is an area that the community can improve upon.

"I really like what they plan to do there," he said. "I think it's not only going to help provide safer, frankly more humane housing for those who need it, but it's also going to provide it in a way that helps those who can get out of this situation get out of i t."

Baker will also be a neighbor, as Ecolab is buying the nearby Travelers Cos. office tower. But Baker said he signed on to help Dorothy Day even before the real estate deal.

Catholic Charities, which aims to complete the Dorothy Day project by 2018, is seeking donations to keep the existing center's doors open while the new building is under construction.