Volunteers prepare Dorothy Day Center's last Thanksgiving meal

By Tim Blotz (Nov 23, 2016)

ST. PAUL, Minn. (KMSP) - In an urban kitchen the size of most suburban living rooms, a small group of volunteers are preparing the Dorothy Day Center’s last Thanksgiving meal.

“It’s been a good run,” said Jim Erdman.

Erdman is a veteran of these meals. Every Thursday for the past nine years, this retired 3M executive joins a retired school teacher, and a retired human resources executive in what’s become a mission of mercy. That mission is creating meals for the homeless.

“It’s just as much a bonding activity as it is providing service to somebody who really needs it,” said Paul Sederstrom, the retired H.R. executive. “Like, 300 somebodies.”

Each day, the Dorothy Day Center provides meals and shelter for more than 250 people who have no home. The center was never built for this kind of capacity. Each night, volunteers and the homeless remove the chairs and tables from the cafeteria and main waiting room and replace them with cots. They sleep together on the floor.

Outside the building a picture of Dorothy Day hangs on a banner with words proclaiming it as a place of dignity. But inside, even the volunteers know those words ring hollow.

“If you’ve seen it ever, they sleep one foot apart,” said Erdman. “That’s not a place to really provide dignity for anybody.”

Catholic Charities has made the same argument for years. Working with the corporate community and the state legislature they launched a $100 million campaign to build what will become Higher Ground. The new homeless facility will offer not just a shelter, but apartments, and services to get people off the streets.

“We’ve been kind of managing people in their distress,” said Tim Marx, Catholic Charities’ CEO. “Now we want to adopt a whole new model and work with people to help them manage themselves to a whole beginning.”

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Even Juanita Quentero is looking forward to it. As a homeless client, Quentero has been in and out of the Dorothy Day Center for the past two years. “Hopefully, I can get out of here pretty soon and have my own place again. It’s going to feel different,” she said.

As for Thanksgiving dinner, Dorothy Day’s chef Mike DeYoung says he expects to serve anywhere from 250 to 300 people on Thursday. Volunteers have been preparing the meal for two days fully aware that this is more than a meal of thanks—it’s a meal of hope for a new beginning.

“That’s the bottom line on all of it, for everyone down here,” said Erdman.