The first phase of St. Paul’s new Dorothy Day Place opens in December

By Tory Cooney
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As falling temperatures and snow usher in the holiday season, crews are preparing to unwrap a new home and hope for the homeless.

Catholic Charities will begin opening portions of its new shelter and housing complex Higher Ground St. Paul on Dec. 22. It is the first phase of an effort years in the making to address overcrowding at downtown’s Dorothy Day Center homeless shelter.

“A lot of our clients and guests have seen the new building going up, and it’s becoming more real as they see the building become more real,” said Catholic Charities President and CEO Tim Marx. “It’s kind of like watching a new house go up. You can tell it’s new … that there’s still some work to do, but you can see people moving in.”

The new five-story concrete and steel building is the first phase of Dorothy Day Place, which is intended to replace the Dorothy Day Center. The center currently shelters about 250 people a night on thin mats laid across the floor.

The new, L-shaped shelter will include 278 free and pay-for-stay bunks as well as 193 small apartments on the upper floors. The lower levels will open Dec. 22 and permanent housing is set to open in waves through late December and early January.
After more than a year of work at the corner of West Fifth Street and Main Street, most of the construction is done. The building’s lighting, heating, plumbing, and air quality are being tested, while off-site volunteers wash and iron 700 sets of sheets and assemble hundreds of hygiene kits and welcome baskets. Security devices need to be installed and, once some of the critical testing is done, a warehouse of furniture and equipment will be moved in and set up.

“DRAMATIC IMPROVEMENT”

Catholic Charities opened the first Higher Ground facility in Minneapolis in 2012. While it follows the same model as the St. Paul shelter, it is only two-thirds the size, Marx said.

“This is probably the most significant thing that Catholic Charities has taken on in a long, long time,” Marx said.

In addition to posted notifications, Dorothy Day Center staff and volunteers have been working with clients one-on-one to make sure they’re prepared for the change and know where to go.

“Even though it’s going to be a dramatic improvement, moving is still a big change,” Marx said. “So we’re making sure that there is a seamlessness to this.”

Nearly 100 volunteers have offered to clean and prepare permanent housing rooms in the new building while more than 50 are cleaning the emergency shelter before Dec. 22. On move-in day, 35 hospitality volunteers will help direct people, check them in, and pass out refreshments, Catholic Charities spokeswoman Therese Gales said.

The Dorothy Day Center will remain open to provide services — including meals, medical care, and housing and employment assistance — until it is demolished as part of the second phase of the project, he said.

The St. Paul Opportunity Center and Dorothy Day Residence, to be built on the site of the current Dorothy Day Center, will expand the center’s services and add additional permanent housing. Construction was slated to begin in the spring with doors to open in December 2018, but the lack of a bonding bill from the last session of Minnesota Legislature has stalled progress.

FUNDRAISING CONTINUES

The whole project, including both Higher Ground St. Paul and the Opportunity Center, is expected to cost $100 million, funded through a partnership between public and private sources.

Catholic Charities has raised $32 million of the $40 million expected from private contributors and nearly $30 million of the $60 million expected to come from public sources. Another $30 million in public money was expected from the last legislative session, Marx said.

“We are hoping for action as soon as possible so that we are able to move this project forward, avoid the cost increases, and limit the impact that delay would cause,” Marx said. “This is just an important part of our social services, our housing, and our civic infrastructure that we need to complete.”

The completed project can serve as a model for the region and continue helping people transition out of crisis and into more stable living situations.

“We don’t have to accept significant homelessness as a permanent issue,” Marx said.

To volunteer or donate, visit Catholic Charities’ website.