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Ottawa homeless shelter unveils plans for \$3.5 million facility to replace 165-year-old building

11,238-square-foot building will more than double current shelter

By Michael Urbanec



Carol Alcorn, executive director of the Illinois Valley Public Action To Deliver Shelter, unveils a new blueprint Wednesday, Feb. 1, 2023, of initial plans to develop a 11,238 square foot building on the existing property on Canal Street. The approximate cost of the new building project will be \$3.5 million. (Scott Anderson)

The new \$3.5 million, 11,238-square-foot homeless shelter at 1120 Canal St. in Ottawa now has floor plans.

Illinois Valley Public Action to Deliver Shelter Executive Director Carol Alcorn unveiled the project Wednesday, with the facility slated to be built on the same lot as the current 165-year-old, 5,320-square-foot building. The building will more than double the space for clients.

PADS in Ottawa has 40 residents, and while the building has a 55-bed capacity, its capacity is pressed. Space alone isn't the biggest issue, for instance, the building has three toilets to serve all its residents and staff.

"The waiting line in the mornings to use a bathroom is especially unpleasant," said Program Director Marissa Trumper. "We have a lot of people getting ready for school, work and appointments. It creates quite the traffic jam."

From Aug. 15 through Dec. 31, PADS served 150 people, 24 of them children. A new facility has been years in the making and Alcorn said she checked out 12 other properties, one of which made it to the zoning process, before she spoke with the city of Ottawa about an alternative. The city was willing to sell PADS its existing property, which it had been renting.

PADS now owns the lot and plans to make better use of the new space.

The new facility will solve the bathroom issue, and create a better possibility for privacy among clients. Clients sleep on bunk beds and have about 3 feet of space between each other.

Trumper said that's not reasonable for most people and it takes a toll on their mental health, on top of everything else they're already addressing.

"They just can't get away from each other," Trumper said. "It takes a toll managing that social aspect of having people get along. How do you co-habitat with 39 other people? I don't know if that's a life skill we should even have to acquire."

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Alcorn said there's clutter, including in the dining room. It's gotten worse as PADS has expanded its services: PADS is open from Aug. 15 through May 31, and it's open 24 hours per day.

It also provides more services than it did when it began 31 years ago, and the lack of space has become detrimental, Alcorn said.

Alcorn said the new building will have more space, including a larger kitchen capable of serving more people, larger dorm rooms for men and women, six family rooms, more office and storage space, a playroom for children, a large multipurpose classroom and isolation rooms with bathrooms for those who have contagious illnesses.

"We learned through COVID-19 that we didn't have the space to isolate anyone," Alcorn said. "So any time someone got COVID, we'd have to drive them to a motel in Streator for a 10-day period."

There, Alcorn said it was the shelter's responsibility to provide food, towels, toilet paper and whatever else clients needed.

The new building, Trumper said, also will have a fenced-in playground.

"It'd be nice to have a space outside where kids can go and burn off some energy but keep their privacy," Trumper said. "That'll be a benefit for them and for every client here who has the energetic kiddos."

Alcorn said it's unclear when construction on the new facility will start but she expects it to begin within the next few years. She's focused now on fundraising, which could begin as soon as next month.

Meanwhile, PADS remains business as usual. The Ottawa location will keep moving forward with the old building, even with its faults.

This includes an animal problem: The building also has issues with rats, bats, raccoons and skunks.

"We've had bats fall from the ceiling and raccoons with babies in our drop ceilings," Alcorn said. "We've had to replace camera wires because they got eaten."

Trumper said skunks have snuck under the building and sprayed, spreading the stench through the whole building. Children have had to go to school smelling like skunk, Trumper said.

"My staff is terrified," Alcorn said. "They aren't comfortable, and it is not good to have a health issue like this. We've spent significant time over the years trying to close all those holes and mitigate these situations, but we really do need a new building."

Despite these issues, PADS has been able to help many people. Ottawa PADS has helped 67 people secure jobs and has placed 23 clients in permanent housing, while serving 15,315 meals.

While the \$3.5 million is being raised through fundraising and what Alcorn can obtain through grants, PADS is looking for volunteers and donors to help keep the shelter running in the meantime.

"We still have a budget that we run on of \$1.8 million, so giving financially or providing paper towels, garbage bags, coffee cups and those kinds of things are a major help," Alcorn said. "This month, I spent about \$800 on those kinds of things. If we have community members that throw some in their cart and drop it off to us, it's greatly appreciated."

Volunteers and donors can find a list of items needed by going to ypads.com, or by calling 815-224-3047.

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