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YWCA plans to buy former Presentation Center, create affordable apartments for survivors of domestic violence

YWCA Cass Clay (YWCA) has announced plans to bring new, safe, and affordable housing in Fargo at the former convent building of the Union of Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

YWCA Emergency Shelter in south Fargo is adjacent to the Presentation Center which is tucked away along the Red River. The proposed sale of the building to YWCA is the newest chapter in a long and friendly relationship.

The Presentation Center was built in 1984 to be home and worship quarters for Sisters of the Presentation after downsizing from their Riverview Place site. In 2015, further declining numbers led the Catholic sisters to close off space at the back of the convent to become four YWCA apartments for domestic violence survivors.

In recent times, it became apparent the convent was too large for the number of sisters residing there. Many of the Sisters relocated to independent living at Riverview Place, River Square, and other apartments during the Fall of 2020. Others are in assisted and skilled care facilities.

In April, months of confidential talks culminated with a signed agreement between Union of Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and YWCA.

“Empty quarters will find new life, and women still very much in need of healing will find a short path to a caring team and empowering programs of YWCA,” says YWCA CEO Erin Prochnow. “During discussions, YWCA shared a vision for a place where survivors could live safely, restore health, grow out from poverty, and have stable, affordable homes to raise their children. This is how our supportive housing program helps change lives after devastating domestic violence or homelessness due to poverty.”

YWCA has begun work to secure an estimated \$6 million in state and federal grants to renovate the building. The goal is to have 19 new residences ready in early 2023, besides the four already occupied since the 2015 project.

Both parties collaborated to name the new housing site **Lantern Light**: a YWCA Supported Residence. In 1770s Ireland, Nano Nagle, foundress of the Presentation Sisters, cared for widows and orphans after her day of teaching children. Bringing food, medicine, and comfort late into the night, she carried her lamp through alleyways and became known as the Lady of the Lantern.

“Lantern Light honors our founder Nano Nagle and the spirit of her charism. It will be a place of safety and hospitality that kindles hope for the future,” says Sister Mary Margaret Mooney. “YWCA will be good stewards of a place that began with Sisters of the Presentation and carries on through their mission.”

The one- to four-bedroom spaces at Lantern Light will be home for approximately 60. YWCA staff will have a presence onsite to help women as they overcome barriers they encounter in life.

With Lantern Light, YWCA will have more than 85 apartments of supportive housing across the Fargo metro, grown in direct accord with strategic plans set by YWCA leaders and community board years ago.

YWCA is most known for its Emergency Shelter, the largest facility of its kind in North Dakota and northwest Minnesota. It serves more than 1,200 women and their children each year.

With YWCA housing, survivors can maintain their progress after a shelter stay. Both shelter and housing staff apply an ‘empowerment philosophy’ – not telling women how to “fix” their lives but helping them pursue their own dreams. Key support comes from a YWCA advocate to work on personal goals for jobs, health, education, parenting, and more.

For the community, YWCA is a force to address important societal goals: ending domestic violence, homelessness, poverty, and racial injustice, as YWCA serves a high proportion of black and Native American women who are helped to economic security.

“Stability is key to success,” says Prochnow. “Lantern Light will provide the safety and sure footing of a home, lighting a path forward. Families can improve their economic stability and health - and the cycles of abuse and poverty are prevented for the next generation through affordable housing and support unique to each family’s goals.”

YWCA has provided women emergency shelter since 1978, opening its current south Fargo site in 2004. YWCA began a housing program in 1989 to operate safe and affordable, short- and long-term housing for low-income women.

“As close neighbors, YWCA and Presentation Sisters have a relationship born out of proximity, and grown through the kinship of similar missions,” says Prochnow. “Both of us feel called to help vulnerable people.”

The earliest cooperative project came in 2006 when Presentation Sisters leased a vacant single-level six-unit apartment building immediately behind the Shelter to YWCA for transitional housing. In this type of housing women live up to two years and pay up to 30 percent of their income in rent.

Proximity of the new Lantern Light to YWCA Emergency Shelter will provide a campus-like environment for women and children.

Among the shelter-based programs that YWCA housing occupants can use are a licensed childcare, school-aged tutoring for children, youth activity programs, and referral of children with developmental or health issues to area agencies. Another key support is an education and employment program to help survivors find jobs, gain education or skills training, attend life skills classes, and more. Additionally, YWCA partners with Sanford Health for a registered nurse at the Shelter and a new health clinic offered onsite by medical residency students.

Meeting a proven need

Lantern Light will help meet a demand for special housing in Fargo. In 2020, 299 women and children applied to live in YWCA Supportive Housing, yet there was capacity for only 57 individuals – just 19 percent of those needing help. Most of those served at the convent site will be domestic violence survivors, who typically get lower placement priority in government-supported housing that prioritizes chronically homeless individuals.

YWCA has managed federal grants and supportive housing for 30 years. In recent years, YWCA successfully planned and developed the 30-unit Grace Garden residence in West Fargo near Lutheran Church of the Cross, a key partner in the project. Like Grace Garden, Lantern Light is permanent supportive housing, meaning the time individuals can live there is not a set term.

The first housing YWCA offered beyond the Shelter was a 4-unit apartment building donated in 1989 by R.G. and Lorry Lyngstad. It was the first site for which YWCA received a 5-year HUD grant to offer transitional housing.

Philanthropy and opportunity aligned

YWCA is purchasing the convent partly with proceeds from the 2020 sale of the building that housed its acclaimed A Child's World childcare center, closed after 20-plus years due to the pandemic. Building operating costs for Lantern Light will be covered with rents paid by occupants and public housing assistance. Staffing and support services will be supported through annual investment growth from YWCA's endowment.

The endowment grew significantly in 2020 with proceeds from the building sale and a \$2 million gift from U.S. philanthropist MacKenzie Scott. YWCA will fundraise another \$1 million over the next year to scale the endowment to the size needed for Lantern Light cash flow.

Scott made the unsolicited \$2 million gift to YWCA Cass Clay through her donor advised fund, and the board of directors kept the gift silent until the announcement of this significant initiative could be made. It is the largest single gift in the history of YWCA Cass Clay.

“This gift was inspiring and truly uplifting. A record unsolicited gift with no strings attached arrived as a challenge to think boldly about the future.” said Prochnow, adding that a portion was used to cover pandemic-related shortfalls in the 2021 budget related to lower event fundraising and other funding interruptions.

Scott's donation to YWCA Cass Clay was among a sweeping \$4.1 billion gifts she made across late 2020 to 384 organizations in all 50 U.S. states, Puerto Rico, and Washington D.C. The gift to YWCA arrived at an opportune time, given the Presentation Center building availability that soon thereafter unfolded. YWCA leaders and board directors thoughtfully considered how both the donation and the building acquisition could support areas of strategic priority.

"To have one of the world's wealthiest women affirm YWCA Cass Clay through her philanthropy carries great significance. Confidence and faith have been placed in our team," said Board Chair Elise Kainz. "MacKenzie Scott took breathtaking action and shone brilliantly in a period of darkness."

Scott's intent was to provide immediate support to people suffering economic effects of the pandemic crisis. Her blog post described a data-driven approach her team took to identify organizations "with strong leadership teams and results." The process involved data analysis on community needs, program outcomes, and each nonprofit's capacity to absorb and make effective use of funding.

The group looked initially at 6,490 organizations, undertook deeper research into 822, ultimately landing on 384. YWCA Cass Clay was not contacted during the research of our organization.

Said Scott: "We do this research and deeper diligence not only to identify organizations with high potential for impact, but also to pave the way for unsolicited and unexpected gifts given with full trust and no strings attached. Because our research is data-driven and rigorous, our giving process can be human and soft."

Organizations, she said, were told "to spend the funding on whatever they believe best serves their efforts. They were told that the entire commitment would be paid upfront and left unrestricted in order to provide them with maximum flexibility."

This flexibility gave YWCA a chance to quickly pursue an emergent opportunity, one that meets a long-range YWCA goal and answers a significant community need.

To follow Lantern Light as it is developed, visit ywcacassclay.org/housing.

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About YWCA Cass Clay

YWCA Cass Clay is where survivors of domestic violence come day and night, 365 days a year, to escape crisis and mend emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Annually, YWCA Emergency Shelter provides safety for more than 1,200 women and children. In addition to operating the largest emergency shelter for women and children in North Dakota and northwest Minnesota, YWCA Cass Clay provides 72 units of safe and affordable supportive housing to assist women and families in gaining stability and independence. The YWCA team walks alongside women on their journey, providing crucial basics like food and clothing, and resources for education and employment as they navigate toward independence. Other key YWCA programs are focused on homeless prevention and racial justice. For more information, visit www.ywcacassclay.org.