

# Local church is repurposed to become a women's development center

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Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church sat on the corner of S.W. 11th Street and S. Youngs Boulevard for 60 years. The parish served a community that slowly transitioned to poor, homeless and immigrant over the course of those six decades. Our Lady of Guadalupe began as an outreach of Little Flower Catholic Church and, until April, served the community as a local parish.

With the parishioners' numbers steadily diminishing, the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City and Catholic Charities commissioned three women with more than 20 years' experience working with the homeless to begin a pilot project in Our Lady of Guadalupe. The parish was converted to a full-time women's center: Sanctuary Women's Development Center. The parish church retains its charm, despite the chancel and altar being converted to office space, as well as a bed for Bo, the soon-to-be-certified therapy dog. In the space that used to be occupied by worshippers, women apply for jobs, create résumés, read, chat, work on crafts and fill out forms to get the paperwork and identification necessary to qualify for benefits and housing. The parish hall, called Mary's House, functions as a meeting space and storage facility for the supplies the ministry distributes to the women and children it serves.

Sanctuary has aided more than 200 women since opening in April, and Kim Woods, the director, said 28 of those have been placed in permanent housing.

"The idea of a day shelter is still in the works," Woods said, "but for now, we don't function as a day shelter. We meet immediate needs as best we can, and we work to get the women who are homeless into permanent housing."

## **CASE MANAGEMENT**

Amy Hampton, Sanctuary's behavioral health case manager, said they were initially concerned that women would come in just for services, like food and financial assistance, or the center's free shower, washer and dryer, and not be interested in case management. "We found they are really interested in case management, though," she said. "Consequently, we spend hours on the phone with various government agencies. Getting a job or housing requires identification. Many of our clients have no birth certificate or no ID. Some have neither. We negotiate ... to get the documents so we can help them find jobs and obtain permanent housing."

To help with the job search, Sanctuary provides Internet access, permanent voicemail service, résumé help, interview coaching and clothing for interviews. Those services are vital to help women transition from homelessness or poverty into permanent housing and gainful employment, but Hampton said Sanctuary is different not because it provides those services, but because of its atmosphere. "We are a small operation, so we know everyone. We treat them well," she said. "Ask our clients. They will tell you there is no judgment here. We take care of their physical needs and anything else they'll let us help with."

One of the clients, who requested anonymity because of the risk of domestic violence, said, "I live on the street, and I have nowhere to shower or clean up. I come here and shower, and they provide me with everything I need. I get to eat when I'm hungry, and I get company from the other women."

## **COMMUNAL COMPONENT**

The communal component is important in Sanctuary's success.

"These women don't just get help from case workers," Woods said. "They participate in a community. They find the support of friends and take responsibility. We have a garden where some of them work. They clean up around the facility. They get involved and give back."

Security is an ongoing concern for the center, although Woods said the men from Grace Rescue Mission across the street and the Oklahoma City Police Department have all been helpful in checking on the center. Men aren't allowed into the facility, but there is a designated space for children, as well as activities.

"I think it's safe to say that every woman here has been a victim of some kind of violence," Hampton said. "Domestic abuse, sexual assault ... yeah, it's safe to say all of them."

## **EMBRACING THE CENTER**

Sandra Carrillo is the administrative assistant and first point of contact for Sanctuary. She gives every woman who comes in a standard questionnaire to determine her needs. The number of new women is now five per day, which is in addition to the regulars. The community is slowly embracing the center and coming to trust it. As a designated food bank location, Sanctuary also provides groceries for anyone who stops by with a need.

"We can give out groceries, and we want to do that," Woods said, "but we also need other things to give them. People on the street don't have healthy food, so we always need healthy snacks and fruit juice."

There is a longer list of needed items, too, including move-in packs.

"We can get these people housing," Hampton said, "but often that means they are sleeping on the floor with a towel or a pillow. We need basic necessities for moving in, and we especially need furniture, but we need people who can deliver it when we need it delivered, because we have no storage space."

Woods said she isn't sure what's in the future for Sanctuary. It will still be there providing services, but Catholic Charities has yet to decide whether it will expand into a day shelter or possibly duplicate the model in smaller facilities around the city.

Private donations are accepted. Interested parties can contact the center at 526-2321. —Greg Horton