

LOCAL

Refugee-claimant housing prepares for timely launch

MAY OPENING COMES AS OFFICIALS EXPECT SPRING INCREASE IN ASYLUM SEEKERS

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Naomi House interim director Sally Nelson says the initiative will help refugee claimants learn English, provide job skills and help them get to know their new home.

The church pastor calls it "providential." The director says it's "serendipitous".

Whatever you call it, the anticipated May opening of transitional housing for 18 newcomers in Winnipeg is timely, proponents of Naomi House say. Years before Manitoba began seeing a rising tide of asylum seekers fleeing the United States for Canada, City Church started looking for a place to house newcomers in need of a place to stay and a friend to help them resettle.

The church found a two-storey building on Ellice Avenue, and volunteers from different church groups and trades

have spent two years gutting the former appliance shop to turn it into living and learning space for recent arrivals to Canada with nowhere else to go.

Now, as Naomi House prepares to open its doors, Manitoba is bracing for a flood of refugee claimants fleeing the U.S. when the weather warms up.

"It's providential," Pastor Tim Nielsen said, drowned out by the whine of power tools as a small but dedicated group of retirees finish the interior. The exterior is complete with a Naomi House awning already offering some shelter.

The West End building has a new HVAC and electrical system, and includes bedrooms with bathrooms, a communal kitchen, a classroom, living area and an outdoor area on the second floor. It was redeveloped on a "pay-as-you-go" basis, Nielsen said.

"It's taken us longer but, when it opens, it's debt free," he said. And they did it without the strings attached to government funding.

"It allows us to follow our mandate," said Nielsen, to provide affordable housing and help to newcomers of any faith or no faith — whether they're immigrants, asylum seekers or privately sponsored refugees.

Naomi House plans to target untapped volunteer potential in the faith community, Nielsen said.

"People want to get involved but don't know how or where," he said.

They plan to match helpers with newcomers in conversational English, job skills and getting to know their new home, said Naomi House interim director Sally Nelson.

"One of the greatest gifts you can give is a friendship that guides them through a new culture and helps them adapt," said Nelson, who has worked in the resettlement community for years.

Naomi House has been reaching out to neighbours, the nearby Central Mosque and other organizations and businesses and will invite them to their open house later this year, Nelson said. The group continues to fundraise and plans to hire a volunteer co-ordinator for Naomi House, she said.

They've looked at what's happening in other cities and provinces, such as Vancouver's not-for-profit transitional housing and support for refugee claimants called Kinbrace.

"Manitoba is one of the last places to have transitional housing for refugee claimants," Nelson said. Now, Winnipeg is experiencing a surge in refugee claimants, and Naomi House is set to open.

"It's serendipitous," she said.

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Read more by Carol Sanders.