

SECTIONS

[News](#)
[Politics](#)
[Opinion](#)
[Community](#)
[Real Estate](#)
[Entertainment](#)
[Sports](#)
[New comers & Community Guide](#)

- Editions -

Nonprofits Connect for Hope

New center in Herndon groups several services under one roof.

By Mike DiCicco

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In its old space on Grove Street, the Jeanie Schmidt Free Clinic was "elbow to elbow to elbow with patients," said Executive Director Meagan Ulrich. Fortunately, the clinic had planned to move out of the space before it even moved in three years ago.

Connections for Hope, a cooperative nonprofit service center that is scheduled to open in the coming days, has been in the works for nearly five years. Now, the clinic, which offers medical care for children from low-income families, as well as uninsured, low-income adults with high blood pressure or diabetes, is the center's largest tenant. With six exam rooms and close to 40 percent more floor space, Ulrich said, "We're going to have a lot more room for all our patients and activities."

BETTER YET, she said, patients will have ready access to a variety of other services under the same roof. Also sharing 13525 Dulles Technology Drive, one of three buildings across the street from Dulles Executive Plaza, are six other nonprofit groups — Just Neighbors, which provides immigration legal services; the Literacy Council of Northern Virginia; the Housing Opportunity Support Team (HOST) and Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing programs of Reston Interfaith; Vecinos Unidos (Neighbors United), which offers homework assistance and other enrichment activities for children in grades one through eight; the Fairfax-Falls Church Community Services Board, which provides support for people with intellectual disabilities, mental illness and alcohol and drug addictions; and Helping Children Worldwide, which is providing the center.

"The idea is, it's kind of a one-stop shop," Ulrich said.

Helping Children Worldwide, which was created at Floris United Methodist Church, started out with programs to help impoverished children in the African nation of Sierra Leone. However, the group decided several years ago that it also wanted to launch a program to assist local people in need, said Executive Director Sarah Newman. Connections for Hope became that program. "We are enabling the center," Newman said.

Though it won't provide a direct service at the center, Helping Children Worldwide, which is a separate entity from Floris United Methodist, is the lessee on the 10,000-square-foot building and will subsidize the costs of training, hire a receptionist and otherwise manage the center. "The idea of a nonprofit center is it provides space at below-market rent," Newman said. The groups will reduce their overhead costs by sharing common areas such as a conference room, a kitchen and a computer training area, as well as the cost of phones, a copier and other equipment. "Hopefully, we'll have some other services from county agencies move in here," Newman said.

She noted that there was a risk in committing to a three-year lease in this economy, "but we all really believe in it."

Bill Threlkeld, director of neighborhood resources for Reston Interfaith, said it made sense to move the group's housing support team to the location, as it was central to the foreclosure "hot spots" of Herndon, Centreville and Chantilly.

WHILE THE HOST TEAM was working with a family on case management, Newman said, family members could avail themselves of literacy training, tutoring, health care, counseling or other services. "All these services can build up this great synergy around the family," she said.

"The big gap is employment these days," Threlkeld said. "That would be a nice piece to add in." He said Reston Interfaith had funds to assist people in obtaining housing, but they couldn't get leases if they didn't have jobs. In many cases, he said, people laid off due to the economy are not used to unemployment and are unfamiliar with job hunting.

"If there's a group that has a real strength in that area, we would be thrilled to talk to them," Newman said.

Although the move was not planned with a recession in mind, Ulrich said saving overhead and expanding floor space was more necessary now than ever. "We're up by about 64 percent in patient visits," she said. "We're just growing by leaps and bounds because of the economy."

"It's really been a wonderful community effort to make this center happen," Newman said. "It's been a pleasure to see the center take off, and I think we're all excited about it."

Connections for Hope will celebrate its grand opening on Feb. 12.



Photo by Mike DiCicco

From left, Jeanie Schmidt Free Clinic Executive Director Meagan Ulrich with volunteers Khenry Min, Caroli Chavez and Jane Storey in what will be the center's medical center at its new location. Connections for Hope center. Several nonprofit organizations will be housed in the new center off Dulles Technology Drive.



Photo by Mike DiCicco

Bill Threlkeld, director of neighborhood resources for Reston Interfaith, and Sarah Newman, Executive Director of Helping Children Worldwide, pose in the new center for Hope center's future computer training room.



Photo by Mike DiCicco

Emily Broadus, administrative assistant for Helping Children Worldwide, and her brother Matt, a seventh-grader at I Middle School, take a moment's pause from unpacking chairs in what will be one of the center's training rooms.

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