

# Beans and Bread renovation makes it easier to dish up more than food

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Sunlight pervades the newly renovated Beans and Bread Center, pouring into hallways and waiting spaces through skylights and transom windows. The atmosphere is warm, clean and inviting – an affirmation of the dignity of homeless and low-income men and women whom the Fells Point day resource center serves daily, said its director Dorothy Sawyer.

“It increases their self-esteem,” Sawyer said of client’s reactions to the improved facility. “They feel good about the new building. They feel good about the new services.”

Beans and Bread, located at 402 S. Bond St., has remained open all but two days of the 16-month, \$5.5 million renovation project. Final touches are still underway, but it plans to begin using its renovated kitchen and dining room Sept. 16.

A St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore program, Beans and Bread has a long history as a volunteer-driven soup kitchen. In the past 20 years, the program has expanded with additional services, including case management, health care access and housing assistance.

With new common areas, offices and meeting rooms, the 17,000-square-foot space is designed to better accommodate those services, while adding others, such as showers, laundry and an expanded health suite.

It is “the next leap” for Beans and Bread services, said John Schiavone, St. Vincent de Paul’s president and CEO.

“It goes way beyond the physical environment that we’re creating here,” he said. “That’s part of it, but more importantly, it’s pushing Beans and Bread to the next evolution of how to serve people who are homeless. We’re proud of that, just as much as the facility.”

The goal is not to increase the number of people whom Beans and Bread serves, but to serve its clients better, Schiavone added. About 300 people use the center daily.

With the center’s renovation, the meal program is adding weekday breakfasts and more weekend lunches. However, for the first time in Beans and Bread’s history, meal services are not the center’s focus, Schiavone said.

“We all recognize that feeding someone a meal only helps them until the next meal,” he said. “We hope to be more successful in building trusting relationships that help clients take the next step and to look at services that will help them move beyond homelessness.”

Beginning this fall, every client will be asked to complete a short survey that will help staff identify the client’s needs. The intake will entitle clients to a membership card, which they will use to identify themselves when they access services. Clients will be encouraged to complete a lengthier intake where staff can assess their best routes to housing, employment, health care and addiction recovery services – the homeless’ four most pressing needs, Schiavone said.

Among clients’ options is the Frederick Ozanam House, recovery-based transitional housing attached to Beans and Bread. Jason O’Connell, a 29-year-old resident, said he hopes Beans and Bread’s makeover encourages more people to take advantage of all of its services, not just meals.

“Here (Beans and Bread) is showing them, ‘Look, it doesn’t have to be that way anymore,’ ” he said of a life of substance abuse, which afflicts many homeless people, and with which he struggled himself. “You can be in this nice place, you can have some nice things; you just have to have a goal and obtain it. ... (Beans and Bread) is going to change a lot of people’s lives, as long as they’re willing to put the effort in.”

Beans and Bread plans to host an open house Oct. 24.

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