

# Esperanza Center opens in temporary location after fire

In the early hours of Sept. 7, Valerie Twanmoh awoke to a call from the Esperanza Center's security company informing her that the building's fire alarms were sounding.

Twanmoh, the director of the Catholic Charities center designed to aid immigrants, said the alarms have disarmed in the past. She was not concerned until she received a call from a staff member a few hours later telling her the morning news had featured a four-alarm fire in Budeke's Paints, right next door to the Esperanza Center.

Clean-up efforts at Esperanza Center continue a month later. Though the blaze was contained by the fire department to Budeke's, an oppressive odor of burnt chemicals remains and toxic smoke permeated every porous surface in the building - from books and electronics, to chairs and medical equipment, to drywall and carpeting - leaving the space unsafe for inhabitants.

Most programs of Esperanza Center are up and running at Assisi House, located across Broadway at 1728 E. Bank St. The social service community outreach program of Sacred Heart of Jesus-Sagrado Corazón de Jesús in Highlandtown and St. Patrick in Fells Point, Assisi House is located behind and to the east of the latter and has been a partner of Esperanza Center for many years, according to Twanmoh.

"They (Assisi House) were the first people that we called and they've been phenomenal," Twanmoh said, adding that the center was able to reach out to its close friend and the parishes' pastor, Redemptorist Father Bruce Lewandowski, less

than a week after the fire.

Not all of Esperanza Center's programs are currently at Assisi House. Family reunification services operate out of a Baltimore Street location, and attorneys working with clients through the legal services department continue to do that elsewhere. New legal client consultations have been suspended, but Twanmoh expects them to resume soon.

Some children's educational programs, including English as a Second Language classes, have been moved to the Southeast Anchor and Brooklyn branches of the Enoch Pratt Free Library.

At the Assisi House, temporary wall dividers, folding chairs and collapsible tables have turned an open hall into a well-organized workspace divided in thirds: the first for client services, offering assistance with everything from parking tickets to translations and referrals to notaries; the second for adult educational programs, such as English as a Second Language and citizenship courses; the third for a health clinic, set up with the assistance of a team from Johns Hopkins, crafted with attention to detail and somewhat reminiscent of a MASH unit.

"It's been very chaotic, but on the other hand, there's this foundation of organization behind it," Twanmoh said. "Everybody has just been terrific."

Diana Siemer, manager of educational services, said the displacement has proven to be a great teambuilding exercise under horrible circumstances. She said she does not often get to work with staff outside of her department.

"All of a sudden, we were crowded into this space together," Siemer said. "You've got to do things, and you've got to serve the clients."

"Our main focus from day one was, 'How can we get back up and running?'"

Twanmoh said. “That was the first thing on everyone’s mind ... We know that the services we provide are very important to the community.”

A sign in both English and Spanish on the door of the fire-damaged Esperanza Center directs clients to the Bank Street location. Efforts have also been made to communicate bilingually to clients on the center’s website, social media and through local Hispanic new sources.

“We hope the word is gradually spreading to our community that we are still here,” Twanmoh said, “just at a slightly different place - or places.”

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