

Sarah's Hope eyeing new home with fingers crossed

The St. Vincent de Paul Society of Baltimore is in negotiations with a developer to rent a Baltimore County property to house the soon-to-be evicted Sarah's Hope shelter, executive director John Schiavone confirmed to the Catholic Review June 26.

St. Vincent de Paul runs Sarah's Hope, the 24-hour shelter that provides rehabilitative services and shelter for the homeless, which ceased operations at the county-operated Eastern Resource Center in Rosedale June 30.

The resource center has been home to Sarah's Hope since 2002.

The St. Vincent de Paul-run shelter has been looking for a new home since its leaders and volunteers were told by Baltimore County- which provided 60 percent of Sarah's Hope operating costs- it would need to reclaim the Eastern Resource Center as an emergency shelter.

Mr. Schiavone met with volunteers of Sarah's Hope June 26 at Trinity Episcopal Church to brief them on developments, but would not identify the location of the building being negotiated.

In an interview with The Catholic Review, he said it was a former church that would be rented initially with the possibility for purchase. The three-acre property has room for expansion, he said, and can fit 10 families ideally.

"We're pretty far apart right now," Mr. Schiavone said of the negotiation process. "We can certainly close the gap on the lease rate. It's the purchase option I'm worried about."

Because of financial restraints, there is not a backup location if negotiations fall apart with the developer of the land.

"We just don't have the luxury of simultaneously exploring a lot of different options," Mr. Schiavone said. "So, we're going to focus on this, see if we can't take it as fast

as possible to completion. If it falls down, then we've got to go to another option and do the same thing again."

There are several other concerns for Mr. Schiavone and his supporters. If a deal is struck, Mr. Schiavone estimated Sarah's Hope would not re-open its doors until January of 2009. Mr. Schiavone said he would continue meeting with passionate volunteers to maintain interest. He also asked them to speak with respective churches and communities, while writing letters to local politicians.

"It is a challenge," he admitted.

Sarah's Hope leaders and St. Vincent de Paul still believe county financial aid is important for keeping the shelter going. Volunteers told Mr. Schiavone they still felt burned by the county's decision to not renew its contract of operations with St. Vincent de Paul.

Similar frustrations were voiced by volunteers in a meeting in late May. At the time, Baltimore County Executive James T. Smith Jr., privately told Sarah's Hope leaders he would ensure county support for their new shelter, Mr. Schiavone said.

Mary L. Harvey, the county's director Community Conservation, was not available for comment June 27.

"He did make a (promise)," Mr. Schiavone said, "and our expectation is that he would make good on that. I guess we'll see."