Sarah’s Circle

Sarah’s Circle is an Illinois not-for-profit organization founded in 1979 serving unaccompanied women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The organization’s service area is the City of Chicago, but Sarah’s Circle does not turn away women in need of services because of geography. Sarah’s Circle meets immediate needs but its primary focus is on permanent solutions. It provides a continuum of services designed to address the complex circumstances that have led each client to become homeless or in unstable housing, and to help her transition into permanent and stable housing.

Sarah’s Circle provided services to 853 unduplicated women in 2015, a 17% increase over 2014. It now estimates it provides services to about 2/3 of homeless unaccompanied women in Chicago. Sarah’s Circle commits itself to continually increasing the number of women it transitions from homelessness to permanent housing. Last year, 114 women were transitioned from homelessness to permanent housing. This year, the goal is 200 women.

Need

The needs of homeless women in Chicago are significant and increasing. The 2015 City of Chicago point-in-time count of homelessness reported an overall increase in homelessness of 8% over 2014. The count reported 4,568 single individuals who are homeless (an increase of 22% over the previous year). Of these, an estimated 32% (1,462) are women.

Our clients have typically become homeless through a complex of personal circumstances that may include any combination of unemployment; low or no income; physical or sexual trauma; severe and persistent mental illness; domestic violence; chronic medical conditions; alcohol and substance abuse; physical disabilities; and criminal histories. Disparities related to race and ethnicity also contribute.

Women are particularly vulnerable to violence on the streets, and in unstable living situations. As they encounter violence, delay medical care, and remain unable to find employment, women lose the health, confidence, and optimism necessary to make it on their own. Women also have unique bio psychosocial needs, which a gender-specific agency is best-suited to address. Even during episodes of housing instability, women also physically, psychologically, and socially deal with pregnancy, menstrual cycles, motherhood, and menopause. Relationships, caregiving, and gender role expectations have particular significance for women as catalysts for both problems and solutions.

Programs

Across programs, Sarah’s Circle staff use best practices and provide case management and clinical services to achieve three overarching goals:

- To welcome all women with safety, respect, and community;
- To support growth in health, well-being, self-sufficiency, and self-determination; and
- To help each woman find her home.

Sarah’s Circle has four primary programs:

The **Daytime Support Center** provides a safe space, physical services, educational and general interest programming, and case management to any woman in need. Food, computers, showers, laundry, and lockers are available. Women who are street homeless, doubled up with friends or family, housed but at
risk of homelessness, or formerly homeless may all take part in this program. The Daytime Support Center is open 9am - 5pm on weekdays. A meal is served daily at 10am.

**Clinical Services** are provided to address the trauma, domestic violence, mental illness, and substance abuse that often contribute to and/or are a consequence of housing instability among the women served. Services including case management, individual and group clinical counseling, including art therapy, are provided on site. In 2015, the art therapy program was expanded to include more individual and group art therapy programming. Other services – such as medical and alcohol and substance use treatment – are provided by referral to established Sarah’s Circle partner institutions.

The **Interim Housing Program** is a 50-bed shelter for women who are homeless, providing 24-hour access and supportive services designed to move women directly into permanent housing as quickly as possible. The targeted length of stay is 120 days, but may be longer if needed. Sarah’s Circle operates from a harm reduction philosophy, taking in all unaccompanied women in need of shelter and continuing to work with women until they achieve their goals. The Interim Housing program is the largest program of this type in Chicago, and the agency has worked hard to increase the efficiency of the program by decreasing the average time spent in Interim Housing.

Sarah’s Circle provides 25 units of **Permanent Supportive Housing** to women who have a disability and have been chronically homeless – homeless for over one year or four times in three years. Some of the women served were homeless for over a decade before being placed in housing by Sarah’s Circle. Each woman in this program also participates in intensive case management with a Housing Coordinator and receives other supportive services tailored to her individual needs. Permanent supportive housing has been proven to improve outcomes for the most difficult to serve individuals and reduce public costs associated with recidivism, inappropriate emergency room use, and other crisis services. In the last quarter of 2015, the Permanent Supportive Housing Program will be expanded to include three additional units specifically for chronically homeless female veterans.

**Collaboration**

Sarah’s Circle works very closely with other organizations in order to assure the broad array of services required to address the severity and complexity of homelessness. Sarah’s Circle has formal collaborative agreements with housing, health, mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, employment services, and job training programs. Sarah’s Circle also participates actively in All Chicago (Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness), the Chicago umbrella organization overseeing HUD and housing prevention funds, advocating to end homelessness, and coordinating service provision. Program staff members sit on various constituency groups and task forces, and Kathy Ragnar, the Executive Director of Sarah’s Circle, sits on the All Chicago Board of Directors.

Sarah’s Circle also has strong relationships in our neighborhood. Numerous community members volunteer and donate to Sarah’s Circle. We have built supportive relationships with Alderman James Cappleman, State Senator Heather Steans, State Representative Greg Harris, and U.S. Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky. Sarah’s Circle reached out to local residential block clubs around our recent capital projects and continues to meet with their representatives to discuss developments. The Finance and Facilities Manager is also Treasurer and Executive Committee member of the local Chamber of Commerce, Uptown Business Partners.
Sarah’s Circle Development Projects

Sarah’s Circle plans to develop a mixed-use residential and commercial property with 40 units of affordable housing, as well as shared supportive services space and a model facility for the organization’s 50-bed Interim Housing program. The site, 4830-4834 N. Sheridan Rd, is located directly next to Sarah’s Circle’s main facility at 4836-4838 N. Sheridan Road and currently consists of a one story building.

The lot size is 7,250 square feet, and the building will have up to 35,700 square feet of space. The first floor will be supportive services space accessible to both Interim Housing and Permanent Housing residents with reception, staff offices, private consultation rooms, a group room, a computer lab, dining, and kitchen space. The second floor will be the 50-bed Interim Housing and the top five floors will have 40 ADA accessible studio apartments with full private bathrooms and kitchenettes. Additionally, there will be some shared community spaces on the residential floors.

The two Sarah’s Circle buildings would be joined with a combined entryway with a 24-hour staffed desk monitoring access to the Interim Housing Program, 40 new apartments, and 10 existing apartments at 4836 N. Sheridan. The second floor Interim Housing space will also have a separate stairwell and elevator from the two elevators accessing the Permanent Housing residential floors. This model will improve security and operating efficiencies for programs. Women in the new project will have access to community programming at the Daytime Support Center.

Previous

Sarah’s Circle gained institutional knowledge in the area of affordable housing development as the developer of a mixed-use facility project completed in 2013. The 16,000 sq. foot project, located at 4836-38 N. Sheridan, includes 10 units of permanent housing, programmatic space for the agency’s daytime program and behavioral health services, and administrative offices. Nine units are accessible and/or adaptable for persons with physical disabilities. The development is a total gut rehab, i.e. has all new mechanical, roofing, flooring, windows, and walls. The building meets Silver Level for LEEDS Certification. Kathy Ragnar (Executive Director) and James Grutsch (Finance and Facilities Manager) were the lead staff with the development of 4838 N. Sheridan and worked directly with the general contractor, Summit Design & Build.

Initially, agency staff worked through the process of obtaining required permits and variances. The project utilized eight levels of financing: HUD grants (2), HOME dollars via the City of Chicago, CDBG via IHDA, FHLB, SBIF, Illinois Affordable Housing Tax Credits, and private donations. Sarah’s Circle managed the work of the architects (Perkins + Will), contractors, and legal services (Mayer Brown). The project had a total development budget of $4,020,544, including an acquisition cost of $930,000, construction hard costs of approximately $2,593,876 and soft costs of $496,668. The project was completed within the budgeted amount.

The development provides permanent and subsidized supportive housing units to 10 chronically homeless women and incomes below 30% of AMI. The site provides easy access to a flexible and comprehensive array of supportive services through Sarah’s Circle Day Time Supportive Services. Sarah’s Circle offers supportive services such as case management, job readiness, housing, life skills, physical necessities, DV groups and additionally, has a solid network of collaborating agencies providing physical and mental health services, substance abuse services, employment and benefits assistance.
Why is this building being proposed?
The development is being proposed to address the acute need to house homeless women in Chicago and provide supportive services. The number of people experiencing homelessness in Chicago as of January 2015 is at the highest level in a decade. Overall homeless increased by 8%, while homelessness among single adults increased by 22%. It is estimated that 1,462 women are homeless on any given night.

What will the building be used for and what programs and services will it provide?
The project will provide 40 supportive housing studio apartments to chronically homeless women with incomes below 30% of Area Median Income (AMI). In addition, it will house our 50-bed Interim Housing program, including space for shared supportive services. Currently, our Interim Housing program exists in leased space. The building will be connected to our existing property which provides services including case management, clinical counseling, art therapy, employment and outside referrals.

What is the difference between the Supportive Housing and Interim Housing programs?
The Supportive Housing program will provide 40 permanent housing units to chronically homeless women and intensive case management services tailored to individual need. The Interim Housing program is a 50-bed shelter providing 24-hour access, meals, and supportive services designed to move women directly into permanent housing as quickly as possible.

What are the hours of operation?
The building will be open 24 hours a day, seven days a week and will have staff on-site at all times.

How will trash pick-up and delivery services be managed?
We will have a private trash hauler who will provide adequate dumpsters to contain all trash and recycling. Deliveries of food and supplies will be made to the rear of the building off the alley.

Will there be parking?
We will have 5 parking spaces including the loading/unloading zone and trash hauling. Historically, none of our permanently housed clients have owned cars. Most of our staff uses public transit to commute to and from work.

What are the building stats?
The building will be 7 stories or 60 feet tall on a 7,250 square foot lot, containing up to 35,700 square feet of space. The front setback will match the existing building and the rear setback will be 30 feet, per code.

What is the construction material?
The building will be steel frame with siding.

How will the project be financed?
The project will be chiefly financed with tax credits under the federal Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program. There will also be some city Tax Increment Financing (TIF) funds.

How soon will the project be built?
The LIHTC Awards will be announced on April 15, 2016. The city review and permit process is estimated to be complete by January 30, 2017 with closing by March 31, 2017. Construction will begin immediately after closing with an estimated completion date of June 30, 2018. We expect a 6 month lease-up period to be fully occupied by December 31, 2018.