

HELP

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"People are coming a few at a time," said Jill Turner, CEO of Children's Advocacy Center, the lead agency at the east Fort Myers House. "We're doing a survey with a lot of the people that come through. They know more about what they need than I do."

The east Fort Myers House was modeled on the United Way House in Dunbar, next to the Soup Kitchen on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. Lee Memorial Health System is paying the rent on the facility.

"What's great about the United Way House is, every neighborhood is different," said Sarah Owen, director of Community Cooperative Ministries Incorporated, the lead agency at the Dunbar House. "The key to success is not going into a neighborhood and saying 'Here's what we're going to do.' We go in and say 'What can we do for you?'"

Lee United Way President Cliff Smith said the Dunbar House is a success because of the "synergy" between the various agencies.

Since opening about a year and a half ago, the front desk at the Dunbar House, which is set up like a doctor's office, went from receiving about 40 people per month to 1,200 people this September.

The housing meltdown and economic downturn, which hit some east Fort Myers laborers hard, was also a factor in the decision to open the new facility.

"Instead of simply feeding the hungry, you can give them the type of things they need to move into a situation in which they can be a productive member of the community," Mr. Smith said.

While the Dunbar House may focus more on the homeless or hungry, the east Fort Myers House will be aimed at families.

"We decided that our mission statement for that house is going to be strengthening families," Ms. Turner said. "We want to be able to have a family come in, and if they need food, a job, a medical referral, to get the services they need in one location."

Community Cooperative will be a partner agency at the east Fort Myers House. The Salvation Army will help families prepare resumes and find work. Hope Hospice will assist with end-of-life care. Hope Clubhouse will cover mental health issues. The

Department of Children and Families Access Computer will assist with applications that require a lot of red-tape, such as food stamps. Any other organizations or volunteers are welcome to offer services there as well.

"Everybody donates something," Ms. Turner said. "Everybody brings something to make it a collaborative effort that works."

The Home Ownership Research Center, which assists families who are in danger of losing their homes to foreclosures, has been one of the busiest agencies at the east House so far.

"What we do is negotiate (with the banks)," said Martha Green, an administrative assistant for the Home Ownership Center.

Ms. Green had just moved into the office last week along with five other workers from her agency.

Family Health Center has been at that location since 1994, and will continue its medical service, but will now also be able to refer patients to the other services.

"We provide primary medical care," said Bob Johns, senior vice president of community partnerships with Family Health Center. "You can be homeless, penniless and we'll see you. We see anyone and everyone."

"The United Way folks approached us to see if we could coordinate with the other agencies that moved in and several of those agencies help with parenting skills and families in crisis."

"What it means is, when a family is seen in our office, our doctor can refer them to a social service agency that deals with learning disabilities or whatever, right next door."

"Or let's say someone comes in for some food stamps, and they're talking to one of those food providers, they can walk next door and see one of the doctors."

"It's kind of a symbiotic relationship."

"We are there to serve the neighborhood and the neighborhood will tell us what it needs. It really is about having a presence and then listening. I have a sneaking suspicion that unemployment will be an issue. For now, we're going to keep our ears open."

United Way Houses are also being planned in North Fort Myers and Cape Coral.

"If there are any agencies that would like to partner with us in east Fort Myers, we'd love to have them," said Ms. Turner.

For more information, call 939-2808 and ask for Phyllis Jacoby or visit www.cac-swfl.org. ■

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