

Oprah, church make way for Dakota County shelter

By Jim Foster
Staff Writer

Two surprise phone calls to the Community Action Council office created the ways and means for establishing another B. Robert Lewis House in northern Dakota County.

The B. Robert Lewis House is a shelter for battered women and their children in Eagan. The shelter is one of the community service programs of-

ferred by the Community Action Council (CAC).

CAC officials were looking at ways to increase their service to other parts of the county when the phone rang last fall. The caller was an associate of talk-show host Oprah Winfrey, who gave a benefit performance in Minneapolis in November.

"Someone from her organization called us and said we were going to

be the beneficiary of half the proceeds from her show," said Jean MacFarland, acting coordinator of the B. Robert Lewis House.

Those proceeds amounted to \$19,298, to be used for establishing a new B. Robert Lewis House.

"It came as a total surprise to us," MacFarland said. "No one (in our office) solicited it. They just called and said she wanted to do it."

With money in hand, the CAC then needed to find a site for the new shelter. Once again, the phone rang.

This time, it was a church official in Inver Grove Heights.

"They offered us (an abandoned convent) to be used as a battered-women's shelter at a nominal fee," said CAC Executive Director Frank Brennan. "It was like a gift from God had dropped in our laps."

The church, which asked to remain unnamed, will lease the building to the CAC for 20 cents per year. The convent they offered is "in great shape" Brennan said, and will need only a few minor repairs and modifications such as new windows and a security system before it opens in mid-September.

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in very handy (in setting up the new shelter)," Brennan said.

Brennan said the need for another shelter has existed since the B. Robert Lewis House opened in 1977. Last year, the shelter, which is licensed to handle up to 30 women and their children, housed 177 women and 289 children.

"Our main objective at the Lewis House is to provide a safe place," MacFarland said. "A shelter gives a women time and space to make a decision. And we support that decision, whatever it is."

Advocates at the shelters provide counseling and advice on legal matters and crisis intervention. They also provide outreach services to women who do not stay at the shelters, and offer weekly support groups.

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The new B. Robert Lewis House will be licensed to handle 15 women and children.

While CAC officials prepare to open the new shelter, they also will be moving into a new home. The CAC's Multi-Service Center, which houses 11 additional human service agencies, will move into the Apple Valley Commons II building in November.

"We're out of space here, and we spent about 18 months looking for a site," Brennan said.

The CAC will lease 29,000 square feet at the Apple Valley Commons II, 15025 Glazier Av. in Apple Valley, with an option to lease an additional 19,000 square feet. The current office at 14451 County Rd. 11 in Burnsville has 20,000 square feet.

It also will get an option to buy the

building, something that it didn't have in Burnsville.

Other agencies housed at the Multi-Service Center include Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota, South Suburban Family Service of St. Paul, and Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Greater Minneapolis.

Having so many human service agencies in one building "is a way of bringing the strengths of different agencies together to service the needs of the community," Brennan said.

"It worked too well. By the third year of our lease (in 1988), we knew we were in trouble for space."