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A Shelter Is Built Green, to Heal Inside and Out

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Every bed in the new shelter has storage drawers, and the windows can be opened to let in fresh air.

Kike Arnal for The New York Times

OAKLAND, Calif. — Although he will not be moving from the dilapidated homeless shelter here for another week, Paul McClendon, 55, has his oversized baby-blue garbage bags packed. Sitting on his bed in a winter jacket, he talked Thursday about the new, so-called green shelter with the central heating that he will be moving into.

For a man who has lived on the streets, the prospect of the new facility was hard to fathom.

“It’s going to be one beautiful place,” Mr. McClendon said, smiling. “It has respect for the environment, global warming and saving trees.”

The facility, Crossroads, which will accommodate 125 residents, may be the only “green” homeless shelter built from the ground up. It has a solar-paneled roof, hydronic heating, artful but practical ceiling fans, nontoxic paint, windows that can be opened to let in fresh air, and desks and bureaus made from pressed wheat.

It will be a big change for residents, who are used to the old shelter with ratty couches, small and inadequate space heaters, floors and walls pocked and blackened with dirt, broken lighting, electrical cords snaking along floors and a leaky ceiling.

The residents are waiting for beds to be delivered to Crossroads so that they can move in.



Crossroads, a new homeless shelter in East Oakland, was built “green” from the ground up, including solar panels on the roof.

Kike Arnal for The New York Times

When Wendy Jackson, executive director of the East Oakland Community Project, began searching for financing for the project, she said some people told her, “ ‘They need a good place, but that’s going too far.’ ” People, she said, “didn’t get it.”

But, Ms. Jackson, a social worker who graduated from Bard College and worked at a homeless shelter for young men in the East Village in Manhattan, said, “There’s a larger issue than just sheltering people.” Most of her residents have asthma, allergies, H.I.V. or diabetes, she said, and they need a healthy environment in which to heal.

Ms. Jackson “had this holistic approach,” said David Kears, the director of the Alameda County Health Care Services Agency. Her attitude, he said, was “ ‘The building has to be healthy to make people healthy.’ ”

Ms. Jackson spent 10 years, seven of them raising money from government and private agencies, replacing the decrepit facility with a state-of-the-art \$11 million building. It is about a mile from the old shelter, in one of the poorer parts of town: there are more than 6,000 homeless in Alameda County, nearly half of them in Oakland.

Most homeless shelters opened in the 1980s in churches, synagogues and abandoned warehouses, said Michael Stoops, acting executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless in Washington. Mr. Stoops, who has worked in the field for 35 years, said he believed Crossroads was the first green homeless shelter and should be “a model for others around the country.”

“The homeless care about the environment,” Mr. Stoops said. “If they can be part of a facility that is reducing energy costs and saving the planet, homeless folks are all in favor of that, just like most Americans.”

Over time, Ms. Jackson convinced critics that an old warehouse was not good enough for her residents.



With its distinctive exterior, the state-of-the-art \$11 million shelter is already a landmark in Alameda County.

Kike Arnal for The New York Times

At Crossroads, each resident will have his own locker closet and storage drawers built into his bed. A day room provides durable wooden chairs and computer carrels.

The dorm-like structure painted crayon colors has angled exterior walls that make it an instant landmark. Ms. Jackson said she wanted a building that was “dignified,” adding, “People in crisis need to see things are under control.” Ms. Jackson said she hoped to lure volunteers with the clean, well-lighted place. Crossroads has an examining room for medical volunteers, a wing for homeless families, with bathrooms and tubs for toddlers who otherwise must shower with their parents, a private dining area and kitchen.

One dorm room and bathroom is set aside for transgender residents. Another will serve as an infirmary for those just released from the hospital.

As Ms. Jackson gave tours of the facility on a recent afternoon, sunlight poured through the windows. “People will be sleeping in a cozy environment and waking to sunlight,” she said.

“This is the intersection of environmental and social justice issues,” said Dr. Mini Swift, the board chairman of the East Oakland project.

Periodically during the afternoon the newly installed security alarm blared — another matter Ms. Jackson would have to resolve.

“We’re asking people to focus on serious issues in their lives,” Ms. Jackson said during a quiet moment. “It’s easier to do that when the place is functional.”